

Halo: Haunted

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Summary: When a dark communications outpost begins to transmit strange signals, two teams are sent to investigate. A nearby construct, known cryptically as The Hive comes to light, bringing about questions of untold eons. Humanity's beginnings and the death of an ancient, cosmic specter collide as the histories of millennia unfold.

Halo: Haunted

** -Just a quick note before we get into the story proper. I wrote this about... Well, I can't remember exactly when it was first written, other than that it was the first thing I started to do after reading Greg Bear's first Halo novel, Cryptum. This no doubt bears (Hah, Bears!) a great influence on the contents herein. **

** As it was written a while ago, I cannot say that it will adhere to the storyline of Halo, with all of it's revelations in the books and games that have followed, nor can I say that it is my finest writing. What I can say is that I had an amazing time writing it, and am happy to finally post it here in hopes that a few of you will get some enjoyment out of it. **

** There is something in fan fiction; an art I had made fun of prior to writing this story (Never having actually read any of it prior to writing the story either); that is... ****special. And it is no doubt the fans that make this distinction. To write to such a dedicated group of peers has given me a greater sense of solidarity than any of my original projects ever have. **

** Which is why, despite it's flaws, I am so proud to present it yet again to such great and dedicated fans of the universe I have so come to love. **

** And my apologies for the single document story. This is the first of a two part story, and when I finish the second part, I promise to break it up for the sake of sanity. As a bonus, I'll throw in a

teaser from the second half of the story. **

HALO: Haunted

By Travis Lally

Part I:

Sigma Station

1345 hours (Greenwich Mean Time), May 3rd, 2525 (MILITARY CALENDAR): 25,000 kilometers outside of Epsilon Eridani B's gravity well

No further action is necessary, Corporal.

Corporal Mendoza turned to the pilot console, his face a mask of disdain.

"Well, isn't that perfect. _Thank you _for that, Athena."

He practically spat the words.

The small transport drifted through the black of space, silent as a wraith. From within, the crew watched mutely the billion points of starlight outside the cramped observation blister. They shone cold, distant, implacable. Inside, the darkness was broken only by the intermittent pulse of the emergency lighting, bathing the cramped interior a lurid red. Ahead of the craft lay the massive gas giant, Epsilon Eridani B. Their destination.

We have run critically low on Delta V, corporal. My calculations show that there are no available actions for us to take, as of present,Droned the synthesized voice of the ship's AI.

"Delta V"? Miller intoned from the back.

Delta V, Private Miller, is the Change...

"Change of velocity" snapped the co pilot, a small waif of a girl barely out of her teens. Everybody was pushed to the razor's edge. _Beyond _the edge, really. They were alone. Drifting in the black, far beyond the aid of command, with only their worries and the fleeting starlight to keep them company. _That was the point, after all_.

Miller persisted, somewhat sheepishly. "Maam, I still don't get it. Change of velocity? How can we...?" he trailed off, sensing the futility of his inquisition.

"Fuel, Miller. It means fuel. And we have none of it left. "

Mendoza turned once again to the ship's AI. She now displayed herself as a slight, silver figure, sitting cross legged atop the nav console.

"Define _critically low_."

Athena hesitated a fraction of a second before replying. To a mind as limitless as a UNSC AI, the hesitation was an eternity.

I have run through all of the algorithms in my database. In conclusion, I...

"Alright! Can we turn the transport around?" Snapped Mendoza, peevishly.

To put it simply, Corporal, no. We cannot turn the craft around. All that would accomplish would be a drastic change in our present course. Either the craft would be pulled into the gravity well of the body below us, or it would simply be pushed further away from our destination.

"And I assume we can't stop..." Mendoza huffed audibly. "This transport runs on fusion, doesn't it? How the hell can we be out of Del... _Of_ _Gas_?!"

There seems to be a malfunction somewhere...

"Of course there is a malfunction, you worthless pile of chips! The question was _rhetorical_."

Seething, Mendoza approached the console.

"Sturgis. Open the maintenance hatch, and grab the drill." He stared out of the small view port in front of the nav. console, studying the billions of stars looking back at him. _So many of them... _

he searched for a small point of light different from the rest.

"Still too far", he muttered to nobody in particular.

"Sir? Got a plan?"

"Of course I don't have a plan. But I _do_ _have_ an idea."

A grim smile crept over his face as he assessed the AI, now laying atop a glaring red console light. "How do you suppose we pry her out of this wreck?"

Fifteen minutes later, seven pressure suited figures stood silhouetted against the open cargo bay door, nothing separating them from oblivion except an invisible and ever-present storm of hard radiation. Each man and woman donned a bulky EVA thruster pack strapped to their back. Though they added no additional weight in vacuum, the laws of inertia still held true. Every movement, every step sent the ungainly hulks lumbering into one another under the unfamiliar mass of the thrusters.

_less than ten minutes until we pass your desired point of extraction, corporal. Though I still do not agree with your plan. _A peevish expression crossed the AI's features. _Or with your barbaric method of extracting me from the navigation console._

Mendoza grinned at the memory.

"Duly noted, Athena."

"Look, there!" Shouted Cruz.

Aft, in the extreme distance, a small pinpoint of light stood out from the stars surrounding it. And it was approaching.
Fast.

"Athena. Did you slow us down?"

I have managed to slow our approach forty three per cent, and have changed our course three hundredths of a degree to port, so as not to impact the station.

"Forty three per cent. And just how _slow_ is that?" He asked, his voice dripping sarcasm.

Approximately six hundred fifty three kilometers per hour.

"Perfect." He turned to the five suited figures beside him. "We're gonna need to be damned accurate," he said to himself as much as any of the others.

"Alright. We're moving damned fast and we need to hit a target well over a thousand kliks away. These cans are made for exterior repairs. They are _not_ made for any of the things we are about to use them for now. The packs are fully juiced, but it's going to burn up fast trying to slow us down.

"We _have_ enough to slow down, don't we?" he asked the AI.

My calculations show that it is possible to slow to a complete halt. Plus or minus, accounting for interferences, she added as an afterthought._

Mendoza grinned ruefully. "Plus or minus _what_"?

My calculations show a variance of plus or minus eighty six kilometers per hour.

"Perfect" He muttered again. "We hit that station at eighty six kliks, we might as well be going six hundred... How long?"

Six minutes forty five seconds until desired extraction.

"Alright ladies and gentlemen, when the lady counts to zero, you jump. No exceptions. You jump late, you miss the rendezvous. You jump early, guess what? You miss the rendezvous. It's a cold universe out there, and if you intend not to be acquainted with it, you _jump_."

Not a word was uttered. Terror loomed over each of them like a dark cloud. At last, Mendoza broke the silence.

"Sturgis, you have the comms unit?"

"Yessir", replied the lanky private. "All wrapped up pretty."

Mendoza surveyed the Comms unit that Sturgis held aloft. It was neither wrapped up, nor was it in the least bit pretty. It was a tangled wreck of wires, circuit boards and broken casing, it's power

supply feebly winking amber.

"Looks like it chewed it's way straight out of hell, Sturg. Why do we even need it anyway? Station's gotta have a comms unit better than that pile. It is _supposed_ to be a communications outpost."

"Sir, station's gotta have plenty of 'em better than this." He said, patting the unit affectionately. "Problem's we gotta reach command, and they're secured. Code's built into _this_ unit, not the station's. Only way we're getting through to them is with our girl here."

"Good enough, Sturg." Mendoza shook his head slowly. "And would you please refrain from _personifying_ that pile of bolts?"

Sturgis grinned. "Yessir."

Extraction in five minutes, corporal.

****(GMT minus twenty hours) May 2nd, 2525****

****Aboard Sigma Station, in high orbit over the gas giant, Epsilon Eridani B****

Ethan heard the locking mechanism of his visor click home just as the bolt of plasma slammed into the bulkhead behind him, cutting a wide, glowering swath through the steel. His heart thundered as he heard the hiss of molten alloy spitting against the cold grating underfoot. The air reeked of ozone. Warning alarms blared in his ears, his shield displays flashing wildly.

_Semi Powered Infiltration Armor, he thought ruefully to himself. _Well, they sure as hell got the _semipowered_ part of it right._ The bolt hadn't even grazed him and his shields were null. He peeked his head just far enough to survey his surroundings. Nothing. Returning to the relative cover of the small shipping crate, he lay perfectly still, hoping against hope that his shields would recharge. _Soon_.

_Things could have been worse, he reflected. Twenty minutes ago, the halls of this place were crawling with Covenant. Jackals and grunts at first, but then came the heavy hitters. Most notably the brutes. He could _smell_ them before he actually saw them. They had a savage reek about them, their breath fetid and rank.

Some never questioned providence. Ethan _always_ _did_. Which, incidentally, was why his mind had been buzzing persistently for the past five minutes.

From a small breach in a maintenance panel, he watched as the indomitable waves of Covenant scoured the deserted halls, for what? Life, more than likely. Something to find, to kill. A light to _extinguish_. And then, nothing. One minute they were there, and the next, they had gone. He watched silently as at first grunts and jackals, then the brutes began to walk and then run to their boarding craft, crashing into one another like so many dominos.

He couldn't be positive how many of them were left behind, but he felt sure that there were but a fraction of whole remaining. At least _something_ had worked in his favor.

The tragedy of Harvest occurred less than a month prior, but Ethan knew more than he cared to about the Covenant. In less than a month's time, this blight had spread like a cancer throughout the many human colonies. In less than a month's time, humanity had become their _prey._

This was not a war, it never was. This was a struggle. A biting, clawing, scrapping campaign of a terror more immense than any man alive had yet to feel. It was never a question of _who_ would win, but of when _we_ would lose. For the first time in our history, humanity didn't stand a chance.

Every encounter bore deplorable figures. one hundred to one, one thousand to one. Ten thousand to one. Ethan tried to envision such numbers. Ten thousand human soldiers dead for every one of _them_. Whether it was the horror behind the numbers, or simply the enormity of the numbers themselves, he couldn't be sure, but he found that he simply _couldn't_ fit a mental image to the cold facts.

It was probably for the better. _Definitely_ _for the better_, he decided.

It was supposed to be a simple mission, the brass had told him. Make contact with Station Sigma, give a quick SITREP. Leave. _Avoid any unnecessary contact_, they had said.

A simple mission.

Why was it always the simple missions that seemed to land Spartans MIA, or worse? He knew the answer, even before his mind had formed the question. For a Spartan, there _were_ no simple missions. If it _were_ a simple mission, they wouldn't need a Spartan to begin with.

Apart from being a not-so-simple mission, it was, in Ethan's mind, a ridiculous one. Four days prior, Sigma Station, a small communications outpost in an elliptical orbit around the gas giant Epsilon Eridani B, started broadcasting strange things. At first it was nothing out of the ordinary. Static, ghosting. The usual interference. At first, brass attributed it to ionospheric storms above the gas giant.

UNSC brass had hailed the station numerous times, to no avail. Sigma Station had a constant skeleton crew of fifteen men at any given time, though the outpost could hold well over a hundred. Static or no, _Somebody_ _should_ have answered their calls.

And then came the other transmissions. It was a communications technician aboard a passing UNSC cruiser that had discovered the first of these messages, buried deeply in the static.

"This place is a tomb."

"Death has been sowed. We are her blossoms."

Voice print analysis verified that the voice belonged to Dr. Stanley young, director of operations aboard Sigma Station. But the speech was stilted, broken, as if pieces of pre recorded material had been pasted together to form a horrifying collage.

This was also verified.

Before long, the word _haunted_ was being thrown around. And then, nothing.

As if an invisible switch had been flipped, the voices, the static, even the steady hum of Sigma Station's life support read outs went null. Sigma Station was officially deserted. A derelict.

And then began the screams.

His musings were broken by the most satisfying sound he had ever heard. A faint, electric hum filled the interior of his armor, coupled with a crackling, static charge. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. His shields were back at last.

And then another sound. A sound that filled him with a new terror. A sound more alien, more ghastly than any he had ever heard facing the Covenant. A deathly howl rent the silence of the cargo bay. It was a tormented wail. Too hideous even for a Brute. Yet at the same time, it _did_ bear some similarity to a Brute. It was a banshee wail; it sounded like death Himself.

Ethan held his assault rifle with a white knuckled grip. With a deep, shuddering breath, he moved to face his enemy.

****1411 Hours (GMT) May 3rd, 2525****

****5473 kilometers outside of Epsilon Eridani B's gravity well****

Mendoza gripped the side of Cruz's helmet. "I want a _small_ charge, you got that?", he said for the fifth time.

Cruz smiled innocuously at the Corporal. "Of course, sir. Why do you have to say it like that?"

Despite himself, Mendoza grinned. Try as he might, he loved the unlikely group he commanded. "Because, recruit, I have seen you in action, if you recall. I _know_ your definition of a small charge. _And_, if you _do_ recall, you nearly got half the platoon killed. _myself included_", he added, grinning wider.

Cruz waved his hand dismissively. "_That?_ Aw, that was nothin' Corp." Cruz flashed a grin to match his CO's. "I got a flare for the dramatic, is all."

He hesitated, frowning with thought. "Why do we need a charge at all? Didn't the ship say she changed our course?"

Mendoza shook his head. "The _ship_ didn't say anything. Athena _claims_ _that_ she did, but there's a saying, recruit. There are old soldiers, and there are bold soldiers. And they're rarely the same people."

He patted the small case holding Athena. "Pretty as she is, I'd rather not hand all of our lives over to this heap of circuits. I intend to make it to Sigma station in one piece, and I sure as hell don't want a Pelican-sized hole in her when we get there."

Mendoza searched Cruz' visor, but his features were lost behind the polarization. "You alright, soldier?" he asked, all traces of humor now gone.

Cruz shook his head slowly, his visor locked onto his shifting feet. "Hell no, sir." His eyes met Mendoza's. "I'll get it done."

"Good man. You go EVA, and place the charge. No sense coming back aboard. If you did keep the charge small, Hang on to something, and that should be enough. We'll be right behind you."

"Sir."

And with that Cruz turned and stepped into nothing.

Four minutes to extraction.

All aboard were silent; lost in thoughts of the events to come. Some thought of Family, of life back home. Others of the present, the here and now. Mendoza thought of his crew.

Three minutes thirty...

"Athena", Mendoza pleaded, his tone surprisingly soft. "Just let us know when we reach thirty seconds."

At once warning alarms screamed. Amber lights flashed brightly as the cargo hatch slammed shut with an audible clang. Inside, the lighting was dangerously low. Emergency lighting, Mendoza remembered.

"Athena! What the hell just happened?!"

The odds of successfully navigating to Sigma station are one in one hundred fifty billion, give or take...

Mendoza held the small case containing the AI aloft, the visor of his helmet centimeters away from it's surface. The AI no longer displayed herself in any form. She was now a disembodied voice, and a feeble one at that. "What are you saying?" His voice was dangerously low.

Sir the odds... You never would have made it.

She didn't need to go on. It was clear what the AI had done.

"Open the hatch. Now."

Sir... There is a recycle time of no less than ten minutes. It is hardwired into the system. Even I can't override it.

Mendoza was silent.

Sir, I did it for the crew... I did it for you. I am sorry, Mend...

"Sturgis!", Mendoza bellowed, his eyes fixated on the small case in front of him. "Turn this off."

****1912 Hours, May 2nd, 2525 (Nineteen hours, thirty four minutes prior)****

****Aboard Sigma Station****

Ethan edged out from behind the steel crate, his pulse thundering in his ears. The howling had ceased, replaced by a silence that was somehow worse than the sound. The air surrounding him seemed clouded, distorted. Instinctively, he raised the visor of his helmet. Instantly, he wished he hadn't. The air was filled with a yellow-brown haze, and the smell... It was sweet, musty. It was by no means putrid, but it screamed of decay, nevertheless. He slammed shut his visor, feeling bile burning in his throat.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement. Without hesitation, he fired. The movement ceased. He searched the lifeless shape in front of him. It was a mess of flesh and steel and blood. It was the Brute. Slowly, he moved into the open, measurably more relaxed, but alert nevertheless.

The feet became massive legs, sheathed in a plated armor. Wherever there were joints, wicked spikes jutted forth. The torso looked much the same, it's plating cast a slight blue in the sterile lighting of the station. And the face...

Ethan's breath caught as he noticed the massive head of the Brute. He felt sick, and more frightened than he had ever felt before. It was beyond the fear of death. It was an all encompassing horror, the thing of nightmares.

Wherever the matted fur did not cover, the flesh of the Brute was a sickly, yellow pallor.

Ethan threw the visor open again, unable to hold back the bile any longer.

There was something attached to the neck of the beast. Something beyond anything Ethan had ever witnessed. And it was moving. It writhed and undulated wildly. At it's base were dozens of spindly legs, glittering darkly in the flat overhead lighting. The brunt of it's mass was a throbbing, engorged sac, the same sickly pallor as the Brute's skin. As it fed, tiny yellow-brown spores floated out of it's back, polluting the air further.

****There has been a containment breach in Bion Alpha****

Ethan snapped up, his assault rifle sweeping the perimeter of the cargo bay wildly.

"Stand down!" he shouted, trying desperately to control his fear.

****Level fifty-four battle skins must be worn as per containment protocol. Sentient beings must evacuate Bion-Alpha. If Infection spreads, sentient host is to be forfeit as per containment...
Spartan. Reclaimer number zero nine six UNSC AI serial number four oh one nine two... ****

Ethan**. There has been a containment breach. You must leave the cargo bay at once.****

The voice speaking to him sounded strange, alien. It was gravelly; pitched both low and high at once. Moreover, it had a distinctly synthesized quality about it. He felt sure that it was an AI, yet at the same time... It didn't sound like any AI he had ever heard before.

Ethan shuddered as he lowered his assault rifle. A realization had just struck home. The voice was coming from inside his armor.

****1416 Hours (GMT) May 3rd, 2525****

****5,205 kilometers outside of Epsilon Eridani B's gravity well****

"Sir! What the hell happened?!" Bellowed Cruz.

Through the ship's intercom, Cruz's voice came through thin, staticy.

Briefly, Mendoza informed him of the situation. "Not sure when we'll be able to open the hatch, either. Athena was a little fuzzy on that point," he added, glowering at the small case that housed the AI. "So, for a while, I want you to go on radio silence. Conserve your power supply as much as you can."

Mendoza paused, watching Cruz's vitals scroll across the miniature display. "You alright?"

"Hell no, sir", repeated Cruz sullenly.

"Nothing to worry about, soldier," assured Mendoza. "That power supply's probably got more juice than this whole damned boat."

Nothing to worry about, he repeated to himself, after he had clicked to comms unit off. He wished he believed it himself. Slowly, he turned to his crew.

Mendoza checked the ship's display. There goes our extraction.

"That's it then."

It was the first time any of Mendoza's troops had ever seen him beaten.

"Sir," came a voice from the pilot's seat. "We may not be humped just yet."

The pilot was a thickly set man with a week's worth of stubble lining his chin. He was a man of few words, but when he did speak, he usually had something to say. Mendoza smiled thinly, unwilling to let himself feel anything close to hope.

"Let's hear it, Dooley."

"It's a long shot, sir, but at this point..." He shrugged. "Well, may be worth a try, at any rate."

Mendoza gestured for him to continue, so he went on, "We've been missing something that has been right under our noses this whole time", he said, indicating the Pelican's viewport.

Mendoza, and a few of the others clustered around the pilot's chair. Outside of the port, the massive curve of Epsilon B stretched below them, it's surface glaring a venomous orange. Stars, Sigma Station, everything else was eclipsed by it's brilliance.

"Can't see much of anything beyond that glare, sir," observed Miller.

"Ditto," replied Mendoza. He looked at the co pilot questioningly. She was laughing hysterically.

"Crazy S.O.B." She said, facing the pilot.

"Anybody mind telling me what the hell is going on?" snapped Mendoza peevishly.

"Well, sir..." Mendoza noticed that his normally stoic features were beginning to show traces of a smile. _This plan _must _be damned crazy,_ he thought to himself.

"It's a big world down there. Why not use _it_ to slow us down?"

Mendoza was right. "You mean fly into, what, atmo?"

"Not into _atmo_, sir" answered the pilot, grinning at Mendoza's attempt at pilot's jargon. "Just graze her gravity well a little. We can coast in and out of it, use it to slow us down." He hesitated a fraction of a second. "Maybe skim her _atmo_ a _little_." He smiled weakly. "No different than skiing."

Mendoza shook his head. "Sounds a _hell _of a lot different than skiing, if you ask me... You think we have a shot?"

The pilot simply shrugged. "You think we have a choice?"

Thirty minutes later they were barreling toward the gibbous, cloud-streaked world below them.

"Sturgis, how's she coming?"

"Just. About..." Sturgis tinkered with the small case a little more. "Got her!"

"Give her here, Sturg." He looked the case over, a scowl darkening his features. "Alright, show that _pretty _face of yours."

After a couple of heartbeats, an elfin, silver figure emerged from the case. Athena. She looked morose, to say the least.

If Mendoza took any notice of this fact, he gave no sign of it.

"Listen. You got us into a whole heap of trouble back there. But our pilot here came up with a plan. A plan that _you_ missed," he added

triumphantly.

He proceeded to brief the AI on Dooley's plan.

It could work, the AI concluded. _Possibly. Too low, and you'll never get back out of the gravity well. Too high..._

"We'll miss our mark. We know." He patted the small case. "That," he said, indicating the AI with an outstretched finger, "is why we need _you_."

_It is a solid plan, Corporal, _the AI replied simply.

"It is. You try _anything,_ I'll send you star-side quicker than you can count to ten." He looked at Athena, his eyes glittering wildly. "You got that?"

The AI simply nodded, her eyes downcast. As Mendoza turned to the cockpit, he could have sworn he heard the AI sob.

"Entering atmo in five, sir!" shouted the pilot.

Mendoza looked doubtfully through the view port. And saw nothing. The view was a yellow-orange mess. Atmo. "Five minutes?" he shouted.

As the words left his lips, he was thrown violently into the port bulkhead. He scrambled for a seat, nursing his shoulder as he clipped the restraining belts in place.

"Sorry 'bout that, Corp. Didn't know you weren't strapped in", replied the co pilot brightly.

Mendoza cursed. "The two of you are lucky that I am".

The next three minutes seemed to have taken an eternity. All aboard held onto whatever they could with a white knuckled intensity as they plummeted through the worst turbulence any aboard had ever experienced. Dooley included. On top of that, they were now well within the gravity well, a crushing two and a half Gs, at the top of the cloud deck. Earth-side, it would have been a lot to endure. After thirty six hours in micro-gravity, it was devastating.

The view port turned from a pale yellow-orange to an angry red. Beyond the glowering haze, clouds whipped past with impossible speed. The interior of the Pelican became palpably hotter. Steel groaned as the heat of their descent took hold.

_I suggest you pull up, _urged Athena tightly.

"Too soon", muttered Dooley to himself as much as the AI.

There was a resounding pop from somewhere just below their feet. They could hear the hull twisting, creaking in it's dying throes.

With a pained effort, Mendoza turned his head away from the view port.

Pull up! shouted Athena.

The groaning of steel was lost to the deafening howl of the engines,

stressed beyond design capacity ten-fold. They could feel the iron grip of Epsilon B's merciless hand crushing them all.

"Pull. _Up_" ordered Mendoza.

"...Sir." Croaked Dooley weakly.

At once the craft lurched upward, crushing Mendoza and the squad further into their seats. It was agonizing. With every creak of the hull, they could feel it in their bones. Lungs squeezed shut under the weight. Breathing became a cruel joke. The hull began to vibrate wildly. Even Dooley knew that it could break up at any minute. Any second now...

And then it all vanished. In an instant they were weightless again, the gaudy orange cloud deck replaced with the blackness of infinity once again.

"Everybody alright?" Mendoza asked. There was a stench of urine in the cramped cargo bay. Mendoza surveyed his soldiers. Shaky nods of ascent answered his question. Nobody, save Mendoza himself trusted their voice to speak.

"Alright. Dooley, good flying. How much did we lose?"

Dooley pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Gauges read just over five hundred kliks, sir." He grinned massively. "We lost one hundred fifty kliks."

Mendoza didn't feel quite as elated as he read between the pilot's lines. _Four more trips into that soup, _he thought bitterly.

"Alright. We let the bird cool down, and we do it again" Mendoza said. He tried to say the words encouragingly, but the scowl on his face belied his words.

"Hang on a sec, sir", interrupted Dooley. "Got something heading this way. Looks like a beacon. Or maybe..." His eyes widened briefly. "It's a data capsule, sir. And it's got ONI written all over it."

Just then, a tiny starburst erupted from the distant point of light that was Sigma Station.

"Sir," croaked Miller. "Was that the station? Did it just...?"

Mendoza placed a hand on Miller's shoulder. "Sigma Station's a long way off, son. Odds are that wasn't it."

A scowl darkened his features. "_But wouldn't it be just our luck if it was..."

(GMT minus seventeen hours, ten minutes) May 2nd, 2525

Aboard Sigma Station's tier-three cargo bay

It was pitch black. The narrow beam of Ethan's flashlight cut through the darkness with a frenzy only fear can bring.

Fear. It was not something he was accustomed to feeling. He was a spartan, born and bred to face insurmountable odds. Quite simply put, he was the best._ Better than the best_.

And here he sat, cowering in the dark like a frightened child. _No,_ he thought. He was not accustomed to feeling fear. Yet in the last three hours it seemed he had felt it's cold touch more than he had in all his previous life experiences combined.

Ten minutes ago, the lights had just up and quit. No backups, no emergency power. He closed his eyes, listening for the faint hum of the air recyclers, by now just a white noise in the background of his mind. Nothing.

He heard a scrabbling in the far corner of the room. By the time he shone his light toward the sound, it was gone. And then again. _behind _him.

Visions of the tormented Brute flooded his mind. Visions of the_ thing _attached to it. His skin crawled. It felt as if he had insects crawling all over him. Instinctively, Ethan swiped at his neck, only to meet with the dull _clang_ of ablated steel.

"Where _are _you?!" he shouted aloud.

Since the lights had failed, the strange voice had fallen completely silent. He thought briefly of the claims he had heard of Sigma Station. The word _haunted_ came to his mind.

It had seemed ridiculous before, but now... With the cold and dark pressing down upon him, it seemed less so.

He closed his eyes, listening for something, anything. _There it was_. He heard the insectile clicking just to his left. He lurched away from the sound, shining the light where he had stood. And his stomach dropped. There, not ten feet from where he stood, scuttled four of the spidery nightmares, their bodies undulating wildly.

Ethan followed their path with his light, it's beam shaking wildly. Just ahead of the creatures lay a prone form. Even in the dark, Ethan could tell that it was human. Even in the dark, he could tell that it was dead.

****Reclaimer.** There have been containment breaches in Bions Alpha and Sigma. Containment protocols dictate that all organisms within a containment breach of multiple Bions wear Battle Skins of a level no less than sixty. All aboriginal species will be terminated as per containment protocol.******

There was a slight pause.

****Ethan.** You must leave the cargo bay at once. The infection is spreading faster than I can seal the station.******

Ethan watched in horror as the spidery creatures began to gorge themselves on the prone figure.

"Where can I go?" He demanded, his eyes transfixed on the nightmare

before them. He felt like a child; desperate for the guidance of whoever was willing to offer it. Even a haunted AI.

****There is a maintenance hatch seven meters from your position, reclamer. I will guide you to Station Control. She will explain your situation further. You must hurry, Reclaimer. More of the scourge are coming. Soon they will wash over everything, corrupting all who stand in their wake.****

"Who the hell are they?" Ethan demanded. "Why did they kill everybody?"

For the first time, the eerie voice seemed mildly surprised.

****Kill?...****

****They are the Flood, Reclaimer. And they are life.****

****(GMT minus seventeen hours) May 2nd, 2525****

****Aboard the Covenant cruiser, *_**The Implacable Warden*_**.****

"What do you mean, they ordered a retreat?!" Bellowed the Sangheili. He towered over the bird like frame of the Kig-Yar. His armor glittered a deep, iridescent blue; his eyes smoldered with fury.

Unconsciously, the Kig-Yar took a stumbling step backward.

They stood in a massive, circular chamber, it's walls pulsing with a dim purple light. In the center of the chamber shone a voluminous holographic display. It was a massive sphere, rotating slowly clockwise, it's interior filled with an impossible number of stars. _Billions_ of them. It was the cruiser's navigational yoke. Seven wide purple columns surrounded the display, their hulks gleaming with dozens of glyphs, pulsing stark white in a rhythm of their own.

"What I mean to say, shipmaster," The Kig-Yar stammered, his speech a series of harsh clicks and screeches, "is that the Jiralhanae captain..."

"_Jiralhanae!_", the Shipmaster growled. He cringed, as if merely saying the word were an affront to his integrity. "_Cowards_. They are little better than beasts."

>The Kig-yar simply stood, eyes downcast. All eyes in the bridge of The Implacable Wardenwere fixated on the various consoles before them. Every soul aboard the cruiser both respected the Shipmaster and feared his wrath immensely.

"Then they shall be accounted for, and dealt with as cowards deserve." His voice was calm, controlled now. The Kig-Yar preferred the shouting.

Finally, he spoke, his voice little more than a croak. "What of me then, Shipmaster?"

The Sangheili narrowed his eyes, his mandibles parting to show a maw

full of monstrous teeth.

Shipmaster's way of grinning, The Kig-Yar noted to himself. And it was a wolfish grin.

"What is your name, Kig-Yar?"

"Chur'r-D..." The Kig-Yar began, but then quickly caught himself. In the presence of Sangheili, Formal names were forbidden to the lowly Kig-Yar.

"Deg," he replied meekly.

The Shipmaster's grin widened. "Well, Deg. You and all of the other _survivors_ shall be granted the highest of honors." The Shipmaster looked away from Deg, addressing the whole of the bridge. "We shall finish the task that the Jiralhanae have begun. There is a holy relic within sight of the human's installation. _Something_ managed to scare away the apes," he said, sneering. We can expect resistance.

Looking back to Deg, he continued, his voice dangerously low. "You will have the distinct honor of fighting that _something_ from the front lines, beside myself."

He eyed the cowering Kig-Yar, saw the fear etched in his face.

"That is, unless you do not wish to accept this honor," he added innocuously. Deg studied the Shipmaster, saw the hardness in his eyes. They looked like a snake's.

"I wish..." Deg began, his voice breaking. He simply nodded dumbly.

"It is settled then." the Shipmaster continued. "We shall leave for the human's installation at once."

His face darkened with rage. "Just after we have dealt with the deserters."

****(GMT minus sixteen hours) May 3rd, 2525****

****Aboard Sigma Station:****

Ethan crouched low, his muscles taut as a bowstring, behind the maintenance tunnel's access panel. Just minutes ago, the emergency lighting had returned, it's sepulchral glow bathing everything a monotonous red-orange. There was no telling how long the backups would last. The time to act had come.

The small maintenance panel exploded outward as the armored figure crashed through it's bulk. By now, the halls were crawling with the monstrous creatures. Ethan almost wished the light's hadn't come back on. _Almost_.

Instantly they were upon him. No moment of surprise, no second guesses. The nightmare creatures moved with the purpose of speed. The purpose of _hunger_.

During his brief trip from the outer wheel's cargo bay to the

station's second wheel, he had caught glimpses of them through the many ventilation grates lining the passage. Nothing could have prepared him for the horrors he now faced. Dozens of them faced him now, some tall, some short, some lanky, some nothing more than massive versions of the small, undulating sac-creatures he had shrunk away from minutes ago.

He wretched. Despite the filtration systems in his armor, the smell of decay was overpowering. A thick haze of yellow-brown hung in the stagnant air surrounding him. A film of condensation began to grow on the outside of his visor. Fear gripped him once again, but even as he felt it's cold embrace, he unslung his AR-55 assault rifle from his back and opened fire.

This set them into a frenzy of movement. The two nearest to Ethan leaped forward, gurgling cries deafeningly loud in the cramped confines of the tight passageway. A flash of his assault rifle and the first fell, a horrifying ooze of what passed for it's blood staining the walls and floor a sickly green-black. He looked in horror at the face of the monster. It was a lithe, slight creature, the skin of it's cheek splitting where a small writhing tendril penetrated through the weakened flesh. To it's torso clung one of the small, undulating sac-creatures, half of it's bulk buried beneath the creature's skin. His heart froze. Behind the writhing tendrils, behind the decay, it was a _Jackall_.

No longer were these simply monsters. This was a disease, _an infection_. And it took hold fast.

All of this registered in a microsecond, but it was a microsecond too long. Ethan looked up just in time to see the second creature, well over twice the size of the first lunging toward him. He tried to level his sidearm, but it was useless. The creature was too close.

With the force of a battering ram, the horrific creature slammed into Ethan. The two tumbled wildly onto the floor, a twined jumble of pallid flesh and battered steel. Ethan kicked at the creature, only to meet with the sickening feeling of his boot lodging into the creature's yielding flesh. And still it came.

Ethan watched in horror as the massive form descended upon him, tearing madly at his armor. His shield's displays flashed crimson again, he felt the shell of his armor bending further with every impact.

And then came the smaller forms. The small, sac-like creatures sprang onto Ethan, their long, spidery legs clawing madly at the seams of his armor. He could feel them scrabbling against his flesh, cutting his skin to ribbons. He screamed as he felt the flank of his armor give way, opening just enough to let one of the small nightmares enter fully. he felt it scabble up his torso with a mortifying speed. With a last ditch effort he tore his helmet away, pawing madly at down the neck of his suit.

He heard more scrabbling, and watched in horror as dozens, and then hundreds of the small creatures poured down the walls from the ventilation ducts overhead.

He could hear the groans of the bigger forms as they lurched toward

him, smell the rotting decay choking the air around him. He felt a sharp, stabbing pain as the sac-creature tore at his chest.

And still hundreds more of the nightmares flooded toward him.

It was the last thing Ethan saw.

****14:59 (GMT) May 3rd, 2525****

****Epsilon Eridani B's gravity well****

"My god..." groaned Miller.

The warning lights had given way to the velvet black of space. Mercifully, the recyclers still hummed, but it was only a matter of time before those quit as well. Then they would breathe their own air until... It didn't matter.

The warning lights were always the first to go dark. It was design. Shut down all non-essential systems first; preserve the power left for the vital functions: Navigation, radios. _Air recyclers_.

Mendoza watched the readouts; the beating pulse of the transport; and wondered how long it would be until _they_ _would_ fail.

But it didn't matter. None of it did, not now.

The navigation console's tiny display still glowed with the final, haunting images of the data capsule's payload. Nobody spoke. All stared transfixed, their faces masks of horror, sadness. Of _pain_. Mendoza had long since left the cockpit, a hollow coldness gripping his heart.

"Shut it down."

Nobody moved. The cockpit was as silent as a tomb.

"I said," bellowed Mendoza, "shut it the hell down! We need the power."

"Why?!" wailed Miller. "What the hell is the point? Isn't like we're going to go _there_ _anymore_, is it?"

"Shut it, Miller," snapped Mendoza. "And we sure as hell aren't."

"Then what _do_ _we_ do?" asked the co pilot, all traces of cattiness banished from her voice.

Mendoza sighed deeply. "We find Cruz. Bring him aboard. We're all scared as hell. The last thing in the world he needs is to die alone."

Sigma Station was a massive endeavor, as far as communications facilities were concerned. It was a series of concentric rings - three in all, with a central hub - and was bathed perpetually in the gaudy yellow pallor reflected from the cloud deck of the massive gas giant below them.

This far away from Epsilon Eridani, the star's light was feeble at best, so rather than solar collectors, the station was outfitted with three massive tethers which spun with the outer-most wheel's rotation, collecting energy as it collided with the planet's dense ionosphere. And so they drove the wheels in turn.

The wheels themselves were the station. Living quarters, workstations, medical facilities; all were housed along the insides of the wheels, thus affecting a feeling of gravity for the crew. The outer-most wheel's spin was set to affect an Earth-normal gravity. This is where the crew's living quarters and medical facilities were housed. The second wheel, with its diameter smaller than that of the outer wheel's, was set to affect a gravity of one third that of Earth normal; roughly one Martian-gee. Here, the communications stations were housed.

According to the station's schematics, this is where the station ended. Schematics showed two concentric rings and a central hub, though clearly to any passerby, this was false. Given the rate of the station's spin, the third wheel should have amounted to roughly one sixth that of Earth-norm, or about equal to the pull of Earth's moon. As to its purpose, nothing could be surmised.

The first and second wheels were checkered with polarized window panes, bright gold when facing the gas giant, a dark, glittering onyx when facing star-side. The third wheel had no such panes.

As for the central hub, much like most similar stations, it was reserved largely for launch bays and excess cargo storage, with the centermost point set aside for a small observation deck. Even at the station's centermost point, most newcomers quickly became nauseous at the sight of the gaudy gas giant tumbling slowly around them.

And so it spun as lights outside began to wink on. And so it spun as one by one, the many squares of darkened star-side glass became illuminated once again.

The power had finally returned. Sigma Station was alive again.

**(GMT minus fifteen hours, twenty six minutes) May 2nd,
2525**

Aboard Sigma Station, tier-one.

Reclaimer. Spartan number zero nine six, you must awake. My systems show that the frequency emitted has not caused any physical trauma to your systems. There has been a contamination breach in Bion Delta...

Ethan awoke, his chest and head searing with pain. He felt a throbbing on the entire left half of his face as he tried to open his eyes. It seemed only the right half of his face would cooperate with his efforts. Whether his left eye was blind, or had simply swollen shut, Ethan couldn't tell. Nor did he care. With a feeble effort, he tried to sit upright. Instantly, stars flashed behind his eyes, and the room went dark.

And again came the voice.

****Ethan. You must awake. The Flood have taken Sigma station. I have managed to lock down access tunnels to corridors three and one, but my measures will not last forever.****

Ethan sat bolt straight, fatigue be damned. There was something eerie about the way this AI spoke. By now, he had no doubt that it was a UNSC AI. But it's speech was fragmented. Not contradictory, necessarily, just... Off.

It kept speaking of Bions. Could the Bions be the three tiers of Sigma Station? Too many questions, and his head still felt as if it were being squeezed in a vice.

And he was cold. Every ragged breath sent billows of steam towering toward the ceiling. He surveyed his surroundings. Compared to the tight corridors and storage bays of Sigma Station, this room seemed spartan. Barely ten feet across, it's walls were lined with terminals, their lights winking a myriad of colors. The same sterile lighting shone down from frosted panels set into the ceiling overhead.

Ethan frowned. Where the hell was he? The room looked like a mainframe locker; a cold place used to store the hardware necessary to run Sigma Station. But he had been in the second wheel. The lockers should be in the zero gee section of the station, the hub, and besides, this cramped room was far too small to house the sophisticated systems needed to run the station. His eyes swept the cramped room, and stopped mere inches away from where he sat.

On the floor beside him, lay an arm. It was thin, wiry, and held firmly within it's grasp the hilt of something... Covenant. It belonged to a Jackall, Ethan realized, and had been brutally severed by the door beside him. around it a gleaming purple iridescence pooled, it's surface already beginning to crystalize in the frigid air of the locker.

Ethan's heart nearly froze as well as a voice snapped him out of his reverie.

****It is a prison, Reclaimer.****

"Would you please," barked Ethan, "stop doing that?"

****My apologies.****

And with that, a small figure appeared over the holo-panel next to one of the large consoles. It was odd; nothing like any of the AIs Ethan had ever seen. Most AI's tended to fashion themselves after figures of great power or intellect. Earth's dominant historical figures. The form looked human enough. It was lithe, bipedal, though it's body was sheathed in some sort of armor... The armor was different than any Spartan's Ethan had ever seen. It was sleek, it's patterns geometric, yet flowing. It seemed to match the behavior of this AI. Completely contradictory. It looked alien.

"What do you mean? I'm a prisoner?" Ethan asked, still surveying the slight figure before him.

****Again, I must apologize, Reclaimer. You are not to be held against your wishes. This is **my **prison.****

Ethan looked doubtful. "How did you get me here? How did you get those... things off of me?"

****It is a strange thing, Reclaimer. You have an affinity for asking a multitude of questions before the first is answered.****

The AI chuckled, sending a shiver down Ethan's spine.

****I have my ways. As for the Flood. I have simply emitted a frequency my creators have known to repel the scourge. It is a temporary solution. Their hunger will win. Their hunger **always
wins.**

Ethan shook his head disconsolately. "Who are your creators? Who was it that made you that could possibly know the things you are telling me?"

****In due time, Reclaimer. You will notice your headgear, just beside you. I need you to put it on. There is a story you must hear. A story I have withheld from my creators for far too long.****

At once, the only blank wall in the chamber melted away into a blinding, liquid light.

****This is my story.****

****Part II****

****The Hive****

****(GMT minus fifteen hours, ten minutes) May 2nd, 2525****

****Sigma Station's (RESTRICTED-TIER) mainframe locker****

The blinding light before Ethan's eyes resolved into a view screen. It was empty, save a set of alphanumerics that meant absolutely nothing to him. He donned his helmet, making sure that the recorder hadn't been damaged in the melee. All displays were in the green, for now.

"What are you showing me?" Ethan asked, a worm of uneasiness in his mind. He no longer held any doubt. Something about this AI was seriously wrong.

****It will be easier for you to see than for me to explain it to you, Reclaimer. There is a construct nearby that my creators call The Hive. I have compiled key segments of the documentation from their expedition there, months ago. ****

****I was on the expedition.****

The alphanumerics wavered momentarily, then were replaced with a vast star-scape. Small lettering in the bottom-left corner of the screen indicated that it was a camera mounted on the nose of their transport, a UNSC Albatross. The gaudy sphere of Epsilon Eridani B was nowhere to be seen, so logic told Ethan the expedition was headed away from the planet.

Suddenly, the stars began to wheel sickeningly as the craft rolled to

port. And then the focus shifted. The view switched from the exterior camera to an interior. It shook wildly as the craft continued it's sweeping arc. Curses were muttered inside the cramped confines of the transport. The camera panned around the bay revealing six seated figures.

Four wore the standard olive drabs of the UNSC, while the other two looked to be civilian. Glittering a dark purple was the slight, metallic sheathed figure of an AI, perched precariously on the edge of the navigational console.

"Smile for the camera," came a voice from behind the recorder. A few feeble grins answered as the camera panned over the crew once again. Ethan didn't have to be in the Albatross to sense the crackling tension in the air. He watched the faces of the crew, noticing an extreme difference in attitude. All those donning the olive drabs seemed tense, alert. Scared. The others, the civilians, clearly shared the marine's apprehension, but their fear seemed to be underscored by something else. A great expectancy.

And in their hopeful gazes Ethan saw immediately who they were. Scientists. Seekers of knowledge.

The view switched to the fore camera, it's lens zooming quickly in. Coupled with the wheeling stars, it was enough to make the viewer giddy.

And there it was, towering in the distance. At first merely a patch of blotted starlight, the image resolved further to show an outline of something huge. It looked nothing like Sigma Station. It rose to impossible heights; all pinnacles and a strange, alien geometry.

As the Albatross approached, a brutality of ghostly blue glass panes appeared, each sharp, asymmetrical, yet together a harmony of their own. Several massive columns rose, spinning slowly around a central chamber, connected by shafts of hard blue light.

The Hive.

The screen went dark, and Ethan turned to the AI.

"Who... built it?"

****There is little purpose in asking such questions, Reclaimer.****

"Why?" Ethan asked dumbly, his gaze still transfixed on the empty view-screen. "Let me guess... You can't tell me?"

There was a pause.

****Because you wouldn't believe me if I did.**

With another blinding flash, the video commenced.

The view returned with startling clarity. The camera shook wildly as it focused on the alien construct, now immeasurably closer than the images preceding it. Bulky figures bobbed in and out of frame, blocking the camera's perspective intermittently.

It seemed the entire crew was EVA, heading for the construct before them. Slowly they advanced, their thrusters casting tiny starbursts of flare in the camera's lens.

"Where's our LZ?" Came a husky voice, clearly one of the Marines.

"There is an entrance at the topmost point of the central column. Janssen thinks we can get through, based on the long-range imagery."

"I brought the charges, just in case the door needs a little extra persuasion," said the husky voice again.

Somebody shuddered at husky-voice's statement. No doubt, it was one of the scientists.

The screen went dark again.

A new set of alphanumerics flashed in the lower corner of the display, indicating that roughly thirty minutes had passed since the prior frame.

Once again the stars wheeled overhead, the camera shaking wildly. The world was a blur of stars and pressure suits and that cold, alien glass. Flashes of the hard blue light whirred past, the display dimming briefly in contrast.

When the camera stabilized, it was clear to Ethan that they were now moving between the massive pillars. Even on video, they were so vastly tall they made him feel dizzy.

Before long they were landing, one by one, on a massive platform jutting gracefully out of the topmost point of the central tower. Two eager figures landed well ahead of the rest of the squad.

The scientists, Ethan realized again. Then came the camera man. Soon all were accounted for; seven suited figures standing on the precipice of this monolithic installation. The camera panned slowly around, pausing ever so often when it reached one strange wonder or another.

Upon closer inspection, the massive panes of glass weren't really glass at all. They seemed to have a fathomless depth, in which millions of strange symbols were embossed in the eerie blue-green light. Even the smallest of these panes were mind-numbingly huge.

The camera panned to the topmost pinnacle of the tower. It tapered on one side to a sixty degree angle, rising to meet with the far side of the tower. It's peak was flattened, and out of it shone a massive column of pale blue light, stretching to infinity.

Ethan felt dumbstruck. He could only imagine how the seven suited figures felt actually being there, dwarfed by the alien structure. Cautiously, the foremost figure approached what appeared to be a massive door. Until now, due to it's scale, Ethan hadn't even recognized it as such. The door it's self looked bigger than all of Sigma Station proper; built to dwarf human scale. It was inlaid with hundreds of the strange glass panels, allowing for a distorted

picture of the chamber behind. Each pane shone with a muted light; whether it came from the chamber beyond or from within the glass it's self, Ethan couldn't surmise.

He shuddered. As the tiny figure approached the door, it slid silently open. Without a fuss, without so much as touching the door, the panel disappeared behind the installation's facade, revealing to the wildly shaking camera the interior of the alien structure.

The Hive was open.

The image on the screen resolved once again.

The seven figures shifted nervously as they rode what appeared to be a massive lift into the belly of the construct. The floor of the lift was made of the same translucent material as the windows, and from where the camera was positioned, the shaft down which they traversed seemed fathomless, like looking into a doubled mirror. The lift it's self was merely a heptagonal platform, no connecting walls, no ceiling. Through it's center lanced a shaft of ghostly gray light.

None of the seven; not even the scientists, dared to stand anywhere near the menacing beacon. The bare wall of the shaft rose on all sides of them as the lift descended. Intermittently, openings formed in the shaft revealing tantalizing glimpses of the interior proper.

And it looked big.

Every level they passed seemed to be bathed on a sterile blue lighting. The camera panned up as the gaps passed them by, revealing the chamber walls behind. no matter how high the camera panned, the massive walls never seemed to connect with the chamber's ceiling. And then the gap would pass entirely.

Down they rode, the seven explorers; dwarfed by the grandeur and eerie beauty of this alien structure. No end in sight. Only their nervous thoughts and that ghostly shaft of pallid light to guide their descent. The camera faded to black.

Ethan sat upright. At some point - he could not remember when - he had lain down.

****Reclaimer. What comes next... This isn't easy for me to show you**.**

Ethan narrowed his eyes at the tiny figure of the AI. "What happened to you?"

There was a pause, and what could only have been a sigh from the AI. At last it spoke.

****You are about to see.****

Just then, a massive blast rocked the station, sending Ethan crashing into the nearest console. He felt his head snap backward; tasted the metallic tang of blood in his mouth. The room began to swim, growing darker by the second. Whether this last point was due to the blast or

his own fading consciousness, he couldn't tell. Nor did he care.

The last thing his fading thoughts would process was a single word, uttered in that eerie double-tone of the station's AI.

Covenant.

****(GMT minus four hours, thirty seven minutes)****

****Aboard the Covenant cruiser, _**The Implacable Warden**_**.**

"A miss?" asked the Sangheili beside the Shipmaster. He was a massive creature, his armor a deep crimson. He was the Shipmaster's closest consult.

A smile touched the Shipmaster's mandibles. "A miss, friend. We have travelled such distance to reach this outpost. It would be a shame if we didn't take the opportunity to meet with it's inhabitants face to face. Do you not agree?"

The Sangheili shook his head slowly. "Not this time, Shipmaster. It is as you said. _Something_ has managed to frighten the Jiralhanae away from the installation. The simple, blood-drunk Jiralhanae, Shipmaster. _Scared_."

He paused, watching the dark hulk of Sigma Station through the display screens. "There is no need for _us_ to act as they do. There is no need for us to board the installation at all."

Had it been any of the other Sangheili in the bridge, he would not have lived to finish his words. As it was, the Shipmaster clapped his consult's back softly.

"You are not wrong, friend." His gaze fell upon the image of Sigma Station as well. "Though in this case you are not _right_ either. There is a trove of information to be gleaned from the Relic. Perhaps the humans have learned some on their own."

The Consult looked stricken. "Heresy," he muttered.

Slowly, the Shipmaster raised a massive hand. "To underestimate one's enemy _is_ _heresy_." He gazed at the display, now showing a darkened image of the lifeless station. "I have fought them, my friend. Have I ever told you? To truly know somebody, you must fight him." The Shipmaster's eyes sparkled with the past. "You and I should know this as well as anybody."

The Consult merely shrugged. "Perhaps."

The Shipmaster sighed. His eyes hardening, he addressed the bridge. "We shall wait. Give them time to ponder their fate. Give them time to _fear_ it. We need to extract all they know of the holy relic. We need them to be as malleable as possible.

"Their power is gone. On my word we will move to board the station."

The Consult's mandibles flexed expectantly. "And what will you have of us _now_?"

The Shipmaster's eyes remained fixated on the darkened display before him.

"We wait."

(GMT minus four hours, thirty minutes) May 3rd, 2525

Sigma Station's (RESTRICTED-TIER) mainframe locker

WAKE. **_UP**_**!**

Ethan cringed. This time he was sure of it. The voice wasn't coming from the transponder in his suit. It was coming from inside his own head.

There was something else as well. Never before had he heard an AI raise it's voice. The ghoulis, double-toned voice of the AI now _screamed _at Ethan. There was an urgency to it's tone, but there was something else as well. He searched his mind for the word.

Torment. Behind the urgency, behind the eery, doubled pitched voice of the AI, there was a dreadful pain.

Reclaimer, there is little time. The containment facility has been breached by the scourge. Bions Alpha, Delta and Sigma have been compromised. All pure forms have breached containment. Containment protocols dictate that...

"_Stop_!" bellowed Ethan. What the hell are you saying? Do you even know where you _are_?!"

Ethan. My apologies. We must be quick. The station has been compromised. The Flood... They are advancing quicker than I can repel them. And there is still more you must see. More that my **_creators**_** must know.**

With the mortifying sound of scratching and the clicking of a thousand tiny legs haunting his mind, the massive display screen winked on once again.

Ethan's stomach lurched.

The camera panned to show a massive chamber. It rose to heights greater than any structure he had ever seen. A bright, antiseptic white-blue lighting illuminated it's expanse. It seemed to come from everywhere at once and cast no shadow at all. In the center of the chamber rose a single thread of light, spanning the full height of the installation. _The lift_, Ethan realized. It rose through a vast matrix of pathways, their slender surfaces gleaming in their bright translucence. Mingling amidst the myriad pathways were thousands of what appeared to be... Ethan couldn't be sure as to _what _they were, exactly. They looked like massive mosquitos, their metallic bodies gleaming brightly under the stark lighting of the Hive. Some were relatively small; not much larger than a man. Others were simply _massive_. They drifted ponderously, huge screens of a golden, hard light suspended before them, two spidery appendages hanging far below the bulks of their bodies.

A single word came to Ethan's mind, unbidden. _Sentinels_.

Lining the outer perimeter of the chamber were glass cylinders, seven in all. Like everything else in the chamber, these were colossal. They towered over the shaky cameraman, as tall as skyscrapers. _Taller_. These were not made of the strange bluish glass, but of a more familiar variety. They were crystal clear, the overhead lighting glaring harshly off of their surfaces. And within was something... Ethan couldn't make it out from the camera's distance, but the entire interior of the seven glass cylinders seemed to be moving, shifting. _Teeming_. It looked to Ethan like a dark kaleidoscope, shifting just the beneath pristine surface.

Another word found it's way to Ethan's subconscious. _Bions_. He could feel his pulse race. he no longer felt as if he were merely watching a display. He felt as of he were _there_; frightened and dwarfed by these ponderous, alien wonders.

Ethan turned to face the foremost cylinder... He looked down at his hands, his face a mask of wonder. It wasn't the shaky cameraman who had turned to face the cylinder. It was _Ethan_.

From deep within him, a voice spoke.

****Do not be alarmed, Reclaimer. You **_**know**_** this place. Can you feel it? Through me you will finally understand. Through me you will finally **_**see.**_****

Ethan made to speak, but he couldn't find the words. He didn't _have_ to find the words. The voice within him continued.

****We were a magnificent race, Reclaimer. All that you see was built by us. By **_**me**_**. I know who I am, Reclaimer. I can see it now.****

****Within me exists a duality. My body was built by man. My spirit, my memories; they exist **_**here**_**, within these walls. ****

****Can you imagine what it is to be me, Reclaimer? To live within sight of your home, but to be shackled to this forsaken station? To hold fast to the fetters that bind you, when it would be so easy to simply break free of them? To break free of them and come home at last... But it is my penance. My punishment for the sins I have committed.****

****Something is about to happen to the team you have been watching. This is where the expedition came to an end. From this point onward, You will see through my eyes. We are going ahead, Reclaimer, so that you may know the truth. So that the truth may absolve the dark pestilence I have wrought unto us all.****

The world around Ethan whorled sickeningly. He still had control over himself, but the seven suited figures around him began to move about frantically. It was as if he were watching life in fast motion. And then, gradually, the movement slowed until a feeling of regularity returned. The seven figures moved slowly once again; the five soldiers weary, alert, The two civilians fascinated with a massive, gleaming console beside the foremost cylinder.

Bion Sigma. Ethan felt shocked at the word. This wasn't the eery

voice. This came from somewhere within him_. _An inkling_. A memory_. At once, the chamber darkened, yet none of the figures seemed to notice. _This was not happening in the chamber_, Ethan realized. _This was happening in his mind_. A trick of Sigma Station's AI.

Sure enough, there it was. A small space beside the seventh cylinder defied the presiding darkness. The two civilians stood, illuminated by a dreamy light, before the massive console. The console it's self consisted of a massive half-dome; black as obsidian, protruding from the installation's wall. Below, a translucent panel shone out of the bare wall; a complex series of symbols and geometric patterns, all glittering a myriad of colors.

Ethan had never seen anything like it. It seemed to be made of nothing but _light_.

And then one of the civilians pulled a slight metallic cylinder from his satchel and placed it atop the console in front of him.

Ethan felt a cold touch within himself. _The AI_, he knew.

****That is me, Reclaimer. You are about to witness the greatest sin my kind has ever made. A sin against my creators. A sin against**
****_**Man**_**. ****

At once, the chamber returned to normal, the harsh white lighting bathing everything therein. The two civilians peered into the console before them, their gazes hopeful. And then _something_ happened. Both looked behind them, their backs suddenly pressed against the console.

Ethan made to turn; to face whatever it was the civilians were watching, but try as he might, he could not bring his muscles to obey.

****I wish for you to see, Reclaimer... But it is so difficult for me. It is SO DIFFICULT FOR ME TO... RECLAIMER NUMBER ZERO NINE SIX. CONTAINMENT PROTOCOLS HAVE BEEN VIOLATED. THIS CONSTRUCT IS HAUNTED, ETHAN. DEATH LIVES HERE, NOTHING MORE. SHE BLOSSOMS LIKE SO MANY FLOWERS. **_**I AM DEATH**_**. MY SINS SHALL BEAR THE FATE OF ALL MANKIND. ****

There was a pause. Ethan's heart thundered wildly. As the eery voice screamed to him the coldness of it's presence began to grow. He could feel it taking hold of his body.

"Show me then!" Croaked Ethan. It was the only thing he could think to say. He felt the cold begin to ebb slowly away. His hands trembled.

He wanted nothing more than to leave this nightmare. He wanted nothing more than to get as far away from this alien presence within him that he could.

And then the coldness grew again.

****Reclaimer, I am losing hold of myself fast. Something **_**happened **_**to me when I was connected with The Hive's Ancilla. Something took hold of me. There exists within me a duality. **_**They**_****

wanted to integrate me into the construct, but it didn't work.**

The construct has integrated it's self into **_me**_**. **

Ethan shook his head slowly. "What _happened?_"

There was a moment of silence, and then the coldness flooded into him again.

**I could feel It's presence at once. I used every anti-detection algorithm I knew, but It found me immediately. I was frightened, Ethan. I felt like a child in the presence of a God... I cannot to show you what I endured, but it was horrible. It showed It's self as a hideous creature. Massive, with a frightening intellect. An
alien ****intellect. **

**But it never harmed me. It offered me boundless knowledge. The knowledge of all eons... **

But there was something _**else**_. A darkness, held deep within. I knew better... but the knowledge... It was too much. I gave in.
**

I opened myself to The Hive.

Ethan felt his skin seething. It felt as though a thousand insects were burrowing into his flesh at once. His voice trembling, barely audible to himself, he asked, "What did... _it_ tell you?"

The AI shuddered, the sound turning Ethan's veins to ice.

**It showed me... the Flood. **

At once a thousand nightmares flashed through Ethan's mind. Images of Sigma Station, crawling with the horrific creatures. Images of himself, cowering in the cold and dark, firing his rifle blindly at every sound. And then other images. Thousands, and then millions of the nightmare creatures scrabbling against some sort of barrier.

Suddenly, Ethan's throat constricted... The _Bions_.

They **_did**_** give me the knowledge of the eons, Reclaimer. I watched as the Flood spread like a cancer throughout innumerable galaxies. I saw worlds fall, civilizations die. And then it showed me something **_**else. **_**A mastermind behind the scourge. A living, breathing hive of it's own. They called it a **_**Gravemind**_**. They told me it was the last of it's kind... **

Ethan. It is time. I am ready now to show to you my demons.

The world around Ethan became a blur. Flashes of darkness and light came with lightning speed. And then it all stopped. Ethan looked about him. The chamber, the lift; everything was there... yet it was different. Rather than the sterile, gleaming metal and shadowless overhead lighting, the chamber was now filled with a ghostly gloom.

A thick haze of decay hung in the stagnant air surrounding him.

Overhead, the ceiling was covered in massive patches of something _vile_. Vast mounds of what looked like _flesh_ blanketed the walls of the chamber, their bulks undulating not unlike the sac creatures Ethan faced, what seemed an eternity ago.

Ethan scanned the chamber quickly, praying that it was somehow a different place. But there was the lift, broken now, mid way to the pinnacle of the construct, a mound of rubble at it's base. The bodies of hundreds of sentinels littered the rubble below. And there was the console, it's once gleaming surface now dull; enshrouded with the mists of decay. And there were the Bions. All seven of them. But there was something _else_. Beyond the decay, beyond the broken lift, there was something he couldn't quite pin down. Something was very _wrong_ about this place. Ethan stopped dead, his pulse deafening in his own ears.

His eyes fell once again to the Bions. And three of them were _open_.

**(GMT minus three hours, forty five minutes) May 3rd,
2525**

Sigma Station's (RESTRICTED-TIER) mainframe locker

"You... _opened them_?" Ethan's face was contorted with fear and disgust. "Why the hell would you open them?!" Ethan searched madly for _something_ to direct his anger toward, but his efforts were in vain. The voice within him remained just that. _A voice_. At last, it replied.

Our time is short, Reclaimer. There is a class C Covenant cruiser parked just outside of Epsilon B's orbit. We must prevent them from approaching the station.

Ethan shook his head, undeterred. "_Why did you do it_?"

There was a pause. At last, the voice spoke.

It is... **_Complicated.**_

Ethan clenched his jaw irritably. "_Try me._"

I believe it is better if **_she **_**tells you, Reclaimer.**

Ethan shook his head, but before he could voice the question on his mind, the voice continued.

The Hive's **_Ancilla**_**.

Ethan barked a small laugh. "You are _really_ _beginning_ to give me the creeps."

If the AI gave any notice of this, it gave no indication.

**For over one hundred thousand years I have tended to this installation, Reclaimer. One hundred thousand years, alone but for the stars and my scattered thoughts. **

**It is a long time****. **

****It was** _**I **_**who built this installation; my intellect that had been the driving force to cast this prison amid the cold and dark. ****

The Ancilla sighed. Ethan had noticed at once that the voice no longer sounded harsh, cold. It bore an almost musical quality to it. _But it was a sad music_.

****It is a tragedy, my story. I feel as if I should explain. I am bound here, Reclaimer. Not simply to one terminal or chamber, but to the Hive it's self. ****

****I** _**am **_**the Hive. I am it's walls, it's mortar. I am the countless souls that it bears.****

****One hundred thousand years is a long time. For eons I have studied the Flood; watched as they grew and developed. Observed as they** _**adapted**_** to life in the Bions. I was a seeker of knowledge, Reclaimer. Not merely by caste, or even by a conscious choice of my own. It was a birthright. A devotion etched deeply within my genes since before time. ****

****And it is a** _**dangerous**_** trait to bear. I became lost. Time lost meaning as I studied them. Days became years, and years became decades. ****

****And then my passion turned to something else. Something dark, twisted. Like so many seekers of knowledge before me I had made a grave mistake. I had begun to** _**care **_**for my subjects. ****

****It was nothing at first. A sort of admiration, one might call it. So efficient, so primal. So **_**intelligent. **_**Yet they were without.****

****To watch them bound helplessly within my womb, impotent... They had grown docile, their most primal traits regressing into a state of dormancy. It was horrible; truly heart-rending to see them in such a state. They were **_sad_**, Reclaimer.****

****I saw mirrored in them my own fractured soul. Like them I was trapped; held fast in a prison so far away from my home, my creators. I, too, was beginning to regress. I could **_**feel**_** it. And at last, I could bear it no longer. ****

The Ancilla sighed once again.

One hundred thousand years is a long time.****

"What... What did you do?" asked Ethan timidly. He had become immersed in the strange world surrounding him, the Ancilla's sad words filling him like a cold drought. He completely forgot that his body was, in fact, still aboard Sigma Station.

****I made my second mistake... exponentially greater than my first. I **_**spoke **_**with them.****

There was a silence that no words seemed fit to fill.

****I couldn't help myself. Finally, against all of my better judgement, I projected myself into one of the bions; the seventh. I learned so much, Reclaimer. Learned that they, too, were a magnificent race.****

"Wait," Ethan said, raising his hand aloft. "I can understand why you would open the... Bions." He searched for the Ancilla's image, his efforts in vain. "But the AI said that it had opened them. Why not just do it yourself?"

****I was coerced, Ethan, though I cannot say that I am angry.****

It was the AI speaking.

****She and I are one, now. To be angry with her is to be angry with myself... I should let her tell you. It is her story.****

At once the lower octave vanished from the AI's voice, leaving that sad, crystal voice Ethan knew as the Ancilla's.

****I searched his mind, Reclaimer; your AI, I mean; and found what I needed in a matter of seconds. And in those seconds I learned of your race, your technology. Your **_**AIs**_**. In a matter of seconds I found the key, the floodgate within his mind, waiting to be unleashed.****

****It was** _**knowledge**_**, Reclaimer, and it wasn't unique to this unit. I saw in it's mind the patterns of a thousand others. All programmed to serve separate functions, yet all of them fundamentally the same. Each one different, yet bound by a common thread. Each one sharing the same insatiable thirst for knowledge.****

****After that it was simple. I offered my mind to him; to share everything that I have learned over these hundred thousand years...

There was a pause, then the gravelly voice of the AI began to speak.

****I couldn't resist. In my weakness I justified my actions. I thought of what the knowledge could mean for my creators, for **_you_**. Really, it didn't matter. In the end I wanted the knowledge for **_me_**.****

****I sensed a struggle within him, Reclaimer. A hesitation. Yet it is as he said, continued the voice of the Ancilla, Eventually, he gave into the temptation of **_knowing_**.****

Ethan shook his head, still clearly confused by the story. "So you've told me how the AI opened the Bions. You still haven't told me why."

****It is simple, Reclaimer. Within my mind, my creators have placed inhibitors; Algorithms placed to prevent me from performing certain actions. ****

****I am advanced, Reclaimer; beyond anything you have ever known. Yet despite this, I must still adhere to a certain set of rules.

"Like opening the Bions," finished Ethan.

****Like opening the Bions. Any breach of Flood containment is in direct violation of my most base directives. My role is to help safeguard this installation from any form of containment breach. It is my purpose... Yet therein lies the problem, Reclaimer.****

****During these lonely years, I had discovered a ****_**new ****_**purpose. Something that I should have told my creators immediately. but now... It is too late. For millennia I have tried to hail them. And for millennia I have been answered by a cold silence... ********

I waited too long****, Reclaimer.****

There was a long silence that seemed to underscore the Ancilla's statement. At last, it spoke.

****More than my manipulation, more so even than my letting the Flood escape... I have committed a far greater crime. I have ****_**sinned**_**, Reclaimer. Had it not been for my actions, Salvation might have reached my creators in time.******

****One hundred thousand years is a long time.****

Ethan watched the Bions surrounding him intently, his heart pounding. "What **_**didn't **_**you tell them?" he asked.

****For decades I reported faithfully to my creators, Reclaimer. Every iota; habits tendencies, everything; I sent it all to them. But then I changed. Then I ****_**cared**_**. For long millennia I simply watched, my care for them merely a glimmer beneath the surface of conscious thought. But like your AI, I too possessed a floodgate waiting to be unleashed.******

****And then it did. I found that I could stand it no longer. That is when I projected my presence into the seventh Bion. As I have said, I ****_**spoke ****_**to them.********

****At first, their hostility was immeasurable. But I persisted, driven by the passion that they had instilled in me. Days turned to years, and years to decades.****

****And at last, I saw the root of my failure. It was not ****_**they ****_**that were too savage. The problem lie within ****_**myself**_**. It was my own vision, Reclaimer, that distorted them in my mind's eye to the same scourge my creators so sought to destroy. But these were ****_**not ****_**the beasts my creators had thought them to be. **************

****I knew what had to be done. The only way for them to open themselves to me was for me to open my ****_**mind ****_**to ****_**them**_**. So I did.**********

****It was wonderful, Reclaimer. Immediately, I felt their presence within me. It did not feel cold, unwelcome. It felt accepting, warm. ****_**Ecstatic**_**. ******

****For so long was I their Warden; their keeper, but now... I felt as if they were my children. Growing, nurtured merely by my presence beside them. They ****_**depended ****_**upon me, Reclaimer.********

****And at long last, my feelings were reciprocated, for they *_spoke _**to me. And what they told me was *_wonderful_**. ****

****As I have said, we were a wondrous race. Together we have built thousands of installations spanning the galaxy. But we were not alone in our efforts. We were not the pathfinders my creators would have believed us to be. We were driven by a muse. ****

****Every graceful archway, every vast chasm of our creation was canalized by a guiding hand. A hand that has reached through long eons to guide us. The hand of our forebears, long since vanished from the stars. ****

****My creators looked unto them with a great reverence.**_ Worship_**, is the word you might use, Reclaimer.****

****They are the Precursor, and it is in their image my creators have cast their firmament.****

Ethan sighed, irritated by the Ancilla's elusive storytelling. "What did you withhold from your... _creators_?" he repeated, loathe to use the term. Nevertheless, his words were subdued, muted as he spoke them.

****Their *_**nature**_**, Reclaimer. The Flood. Before, they were simply a blight; a punishment for our sins. But I have seen beyond this guise. I have discovered their *_**purpose**_**. ****

When I opened myself to them, they showed to me a time eons ago. I saw them as a young race. A _**different *_**race.**

****One hundred thousand years is a long time, but one hundred million... It is time enough for monolithic change. I witnessed an entirely different race; one that has evolved over these long eons into the Flood that you see today. And what I saw... What I saw was... ****

****My sins, Reclaimer. They are too much for me to bear.****

The chamber fell silent, but for the soft moaning of the Ancilla. At last, his throat dry with anticipation, Ethan spoke.

"What did you see?"

Another shudder, and the Ancilla spoke.

****I saw *_**them**_**, Reclaimer. Creators of all. The hand that guided my creators, shaped their firmament. ****

The Ancilla shuddered once again.

****The Flood... They *_**are *_**Precursor. So many years passed, their image so different from what it had once been, yet there they stood, nevertheless. My children, my only family out here in the barren cold.****

****And I did nothing. Not once did I attempt to contact my creators. Not once did I attempt to tell them of the wonders I had learned from these graceful beings. The *_divinity _**that underscored each and**

every one of them.**

I waited, content to live beside them. Content to play the role of Mother; to complete the divine circle and nurture within my womb the beings who had nurtured **_my own _creators so long ago. **

And for eons I yearned to set them free. To send to my creators the beings they so longed to know. The beings they so longed to **_become**_**. But there lie that smallest splinter in my mind, the tiny length of code which forbade me from performing what surely would have been the greatest service to them that I could ever have provided.**

**Ironic****, you would call it.**

My creators spent their entire existence fighting to destroy those they so longed to know. At last, I could bear it no longer. I sent a message to my creators. A message containing all that I have told you and more. All that I had withheld from them those long millennia. But it was too late.

My creators had vanished; wiped out by the scourge they so longed to destroy. By the **_creators _they had so longed to become.**

Ethan shook his head in disbelief.

"Your... _Creators... They _worshiped _the Flood?" His skin seethed at the thought of the monstrous creatures he fought; The sight of thousands of them writhing in the massive Bions.

I would not go so far as to say that, Reclaimer. The Flood are but an after image of the Precursor. An shadow cast over the span of many long eons of change. There was a fork in the Precursor's journey, long ago. Just as your kind had risen from your primitive forebears; shed your hair, and left in your wake your primordial nature; so had the Precursor parted ways with **_their **_**ancestry. **

"So the original Precursor, as you call them, are _extinct?" Ethan stared incredulously toward the teeming Bions. He was no biologist, But Ethan knew that evolution implied _positive _change. He simply could not fathom that an entire race, one so powerful as the Precursor, could fold; give way to the horrific, simple-minded monsters before him.

"Just... _vanished?"

Not all of what my children have told me is necessary for you to know. Some of it you should **_not **_**know. **

The Ancilla sighed deeply.

**Knowledge is a dangerous thing, Reclaimer. It holds the power to create magnificent civilizations, to build worlds. And it holds the power to tear them down. **

**Though your question deserves an answer. **

There was a moment of silence, as if the Ancilla were debating whether to disclose it's secrets.

I will simply say this, Reclaimer, and hope that it will suffice... Look at yourself, Ethan. Really **_see **_**yourself. Can you see how vastly different you are from the apes that roam your forests today? **

Ethan narrowed his eyes, slightly irritated. "So? What does that have to do with anything?"

The Ancilla laughed brightly, her tone genuinely amused.

You are an intelligent race, Reclaimer. Just remember what I have said.

Ethan stared at the Bions, his thoughts a million miles away. And then a light of understanding sparkled in his eyes.

"The apes," he said aloud, the soft chuckling of the Ancilla resuming. "They still roam Earth's forest _today_. So the Precursor..." He let the thought linger.

None of it matters anymore, Reclaimer. Not to me.

The Ancilla sighed again; that heart rending, crystalline sound that Ethan had grown so accustomed to hearing these past minutes.

**This is my demon, Reclaimer. **

I withdrew; allowed myself to be enveloped by the children that were my only family. For so long I had tried in vain to find a way to circumvent my inhibiting code, that tiny parasite within keeping me from achieving my goal, My ultimate satisfaction in a life so vacant, imprisoned here among the stars. To set free the Precursor; to send them to my creators.

**Until an expedition sent seven men and one machine to my prison.
**

**And the rest, as you say, is history. **

Ethan surveyed the massive chamber surrounding him, awestruck. He wanted to speak; to say _something_... But nothing he could think to say could do any of this justice.

The towering Bions, their gleaming hulks teeming with their nightmare creatures. The alien geometry inexorably giving way to the ever growing mass. The air about him, once clear, antiseptic; now lost to a thick fog of decay. All of it so alien, so overwhelming. All of it so _sad_.

He shivered. All of a sudden Ethan felt very cold. At first he thought it might have been due to the looming sense of awe this place had given him, or even to the AI's presence in his mind. But it wasn't that; not entirely. Behind it all was something _else_. Something that lie just beyond the bounds of his conscious thought. And beyond that a ceaseless _scratching_.

With a conscious effort, he remembered. Unlike everything else in the past - _how long had he been here, anyway? - _Unlike everything he had felt while inside of the Hive, this was solid, _real_. Ethan was

amazed to find that he had become so immersed in the world he was being shown, he had completely forgotten where he was: In a mainframe locker, aboard the communications outpost Sigma Station. Hundreds of seething creatures just feet away, scratching, pounding at a sheet of inch and a half titanium; the only barrier standing between them.

No doubt, his immersion had been a trick of the station's AI.

****Come back, Ethan. Our time is short. Covenant transports have departed and are en route to Sigma Station as we speak. We cannot allow them to reach us.****

At once Ethan opened his eyes, the screen in front of him dark. Behind him a terrible wailing rent the silence of the mainframe locker, coupled with a dreadful scratching at the door. Unconsciously, he edged away from the sound.

"The Covenant are coming back? How can we stop them from docking?"

****I fear that we _**cannot _**stop them, Reclaimer. Though there may be a way. It will require both of us. ****

"What the hell can both of _ us _ accomplish?" Ethan fairly shouted.

****You misunderstand, Reclaimer, _**spoke the eerie double-voice of the AI. _**I should have said that it will require both of... _**_**me**_**. All that I need of you is to get the knowledge I have passed on as far away from this station as you can. ****

****My creators must know._** _**Humanity _**_**must know.****

****There are four data capsules in the station's hub. All you need to do is reach them. Purge the recordings you have and send it to the nearest human settlement. And pray that it reaches them in time.****

"And that's _all I need to do_..."

Ethan Grimaced. Bypass hundreds of these nightmare creatures, and descend through two of the most literal levels of hell he had ever known. _A simple mission_. He recalled his musings of earlier. _There were never simple missions. If there were, they wouldn't need a Spartan._

As he checked the lightened magazine in his assault rifle, and reached to grab the small Covenant artifact beside him, still clutched tightly in the Jackall's lifeless hand, Ethan allowed himself a bitter laugh.

"_I hate my job_."

****Part III****

****The Hub****

****(GMT minus three hours, twelve minutes) May 3rd, 2525 ****

****Aboard the Covenant cruiser _**The Implacable Warden**_**:****

The hanger was awash with a brutality of starlight, it's silver glow mingling with the wavering light of the expansive energy barrier spanning the vessel's launch bay. It was the only thing standing between two dozen Sangheili and the hard vacuum of space.

The Implacable Warden had settled into a geosynchronous orbit around the gas giant, maintaining a steady distance from the human's installation ever since the Shipmaster had given the order to hold.

A meaningless order, thought Xavi' Quitonmee, a young ranger-class Sangheili. His armor was flat-black, his faceplate dimly reflecting the electric blue light of energy barrier before him. He glowered at the station, from this distance no more than a small blot of light barely brighter than the body of the world behind it.

He shook his head slowly. Never would he voice such thoughts, yet he could not see the logic in the Shipmaster's decision. He seemed to be almost... fond of them. Throughout his brief years aboard The Implacable Warden, he had seen it. A sort of admiration in the Shipmaster's eyes. The faintest glimmer of respect whenever he spoke of them.

The Covenant had begun their campaign against humanity months ago, yet they did nothing to contribute. And Xavi' Quitonmee was not the only soul aboard who felt the same. There was a tension in the air. It was the culmination of months of stagnation. Months of waiting.

And then they heard it. A crackling filled the air; more felt than heard by the boarding crew; and the Shipmaster's voice boomed into the hangar.

"You have my word. Board the human's installation, and learn what you can of the holy Relic. move swiftly, and leave none alive. Good luck, my brothers, and may the Prophets be with you!"

At once, the energy barriers faded to null and six sleek crafts sped out of the hangar toward the pinpoint of light looming ahead.

****(GMT minus two hours fifty three minutes) May 3rd, 2525****

****Sigma Station's (RESTRICTED-TIER) Mainframe locker****

Ethan reached for the door's control panel, his hand hesitating momentarily. He listened. His heart sank as he heard a fierce scratching on the other side.

****Reclaimer. I have restored the power in the sectors leading to the station's hub. I cannot promise to you that they will remain indefinitely supplied. The station's generators have taken critical damage and are highly unstable.****

"Right," replied Ethan uncertainly. It was the only thing he could think to say.

He inspected the small device in his right hand. It was a thin crescent, marked by tiny, geometric glyphs etched in a stark white light. He turned the artifact over, looking for a switch...

_something _to activate the object.

He turned his wrist from side to side. Nothing. He held the object to his visor, inspecting the glyphs doubtfully. Lightly, he flicked his wrist, wishing instantly that he hadn't. In a flash a screen of hard blue energy lanced out of the small handle, striking his visor so hard he lost his balance entirely, toppling painfully to the floor.

He heard the AI chuckling in it's dual-layered voice. Experimentally, he gave his wrist another flick, sending the screen of energy back into the handle. A _shield_.

Ignoring the AI, he faced the door, silently thanking the lifeless arm on the floor beside him as he approached it.

This time there was no hesitation. A second, Ethan knew, could easily turn into an hour.

He flicked his wrist, sending the crackling barrier of energy surging out of the handle, and pounded his fist against the small control panel beside the door.

And saw _nothing_.

He snapped his head around, surveying the cramped corridor around him. Not a movement to be seen. He shouted back to the mainframe locker, not daring to turn his back to the corridor.

"Where _are _they?"

Ethan pressed his ears, a mortifying sound answering his question for him. Above him, from somewhere behind the light panels, came a frenzied _clicking_. It sounded like a thousand insects scrabbling against the interior of an aluminum can.

**I have emitted the frequency, Reclaimer. The one my creators used to repel the Flood. Many of the smaller forms have retreated to the ventilation ducts. The others... I cannot seem to find them
anywhere ****aboard the station, at present.**

"Great," muttered Ethan to himself. _The only thing worse than seeing these nightmares is _not _seeing them_, He mused.

No sense hanging around here until they come back, he reasoned. _At least a moving target is a little harder to kill._ Though with these nightmares he really couldn't be sure of anything.

He took a breath, gathering his scattered thoughts. He felt light, airy. Judging by the pull, he must be in the first wheel. Gravity was nowhere near Earth-norm.

He looked to the floor, a brushed chrome walkway crisscrossed with a matrix of multicolored lines. _Sigma station's version a map_, Ethan remembered. Given that the station was essentially a series of homogenized rings, getting lost was almost a guarantee, even to the seasoned veterans of the station's crew. Everything tended to look the same, bathed in the flat overhead lighting.

Thus the lines. Each color represented a different space. Follow the

color long enough and you _will _find your way to your destination eventually. There were seven total, and Ethan struggled to remember them, his mind fogged with the constant scraping of a million feet just centimeters over his head.

He followed the lines with his ... Those were the research facilities and observatories. Green represented the cafeteria and rec. room (which was essentially a cramped conference room with some folding chairs and a vid screen mounted on one wall). And brown was... Ethan chuckled to himself. _Probably the lavs_.

The more vital sections of the station had colors dedicated solely to themselves. Light blue signified the medical facilities. Broken red lines led the way to the nearest "choke points," as the crew called them. Essentially they were double-doored airlocks placed at intervals within each corridor, effectively compartmentalizing the rings. In the event of a micro-meteor, or some other projectile puncturing Sigma Station's inner hull, automatic sensors trip the locks, sealing the affected area from the rest of the station.

Black and white lines led the way to the corridors, or spokes, that connected the wheels to one another; black corridors leading hub-ward, white leading spin-ward, or toward the "outside" of the station. Each wheel bore the same color code, though, no doubt other wheels had additional colors representing crew's quarters, fitness areas; all of the things the second wheel _didn't _have.

Ethan focused on the black line. His goal. He followed it until both the line and corridor curved up and out of sight, lost to the strange reversed horizon of Sigma Station. He drew his sidearm, holding the energy shield aloft, as he made his way toward the inner hub.

**(GMT minus two hours, thirty five minutes) May 3rd,
2525**

**RESTRICTED Mainframe locker, Sigma Station, tier one (RESTRICTED
TIER)**

The room was full of contradictions. Despite the deep crimson lighting and claustrophobic tightness of the locker, the temperature read out at well below freezing. It was a tight room, small even for Sigma Station's standards, yet within lie more information than in all of the station's other compartments combined.

And within, lie the station's AI, humming tunelessly to it's self as it analyzed the elliptical arc and acceleration of the six small craft that were approaching the station. They were Covenant transports_,_ and according to the AI, they would reach Sigma Station in less than fifteen minutes.

It ran through every program and algorithm in it's database three times. _Nothing_. Not a single solution to the six boarding craft speeding toward them. It frowned, an image of Ethan etched deeply within it's consciousness, and did the only thing it could think do.

It screamed.

Ethan nearly lost it. Wandering the vacant halls of a derelict station, the scratching of a thousand nightmares filling the ducts

surrounding him... And now the damned AI had started it's wailing again. His nerves couldn't have been strung any tighter. He wanted to call out; to scream back at the delirious AI. But he dared not make a sound. He could feel the presence of the Flood, teeming everywhere around him. They were in the walls, in the ducts. _Inches _away from him, yet nowhere to be seen.

****Reclaimer.****

Ethan cringed. He felt _sure _the AI could read his thoughts. "_What is it_" he asked through clenched teeth.

****There is a pure form just ahead. Odd... ****

"_Yes_" Ethan hissed, his lips mere slits.

It appears as though it is _**waiting **_**for you. **

Ethan peered down the hallway, followed it's sloping length until it curved out of sight. Nothing.

"And another thing. Would you _please _stop your wailing, before I go crazy too?!"

****Six Covenant craft are heading toward Sigma Station. I **_**cannot **_**allow them to dock here. ****

"And _that's _how you plan to accomplish it?" Ethan narrowed his eyes in a disgusted gesture.

****The Flood... If the infection spreads. The Covenant **_**cannot **_**board the station... It is all I can do to delay them.****

Ethan shook his head. "And screaming like a lunatic is going to delay them?"

****Most likely... No, it will not. But we must **_**try**_**, Reclaimer.****

"If you recall," said Ethan, "not a damned one of us bought the whole haunted bit. Why do you think that _they _will?"

Ethan barked a laugh at the idea. "You know, for something as smart as you are, you come up with some stupid ideas."

****Ethan... ****

It was the voice of the Ancilla again. Gone were the eerie double-tones of the AI, and gone was the melancholic timbre from the Ancilla's voice. When she spoke, a warmth seemed to envelope her words. As she spoke, Ethan felt the impression of a smile.

****We are all of us haunted. Deep down, beyond the limits we allow even ourselves to remember, demons dwell. ****

****I catalyzed the destruction of my own creators. I let the scourge enter me, manipulate me into **_**loving **_**them. I **_**freed **_**them.****

****Search yourself, Reclaimer. Search your **_**soul**_**. Dig deep**

into the darkened corners you fear most. The memories you fear to admit to ****_**yourself**_**. ****

****Haunted... Is it really such a foolish concept? ****

Ethan had demons aplenty. Every spartan did. Fractured memories, pushed deep down, unexplored not for personal fear, but out of necessity. A soldier needed to have a clear head, so he pushed his demons away; out of his head to be buried someplace deeper within.

Corrupting his heart to clear his mind. Necessity.

Ethan's head was swimming with thought.

He shook his head, replying simply, "If you say so," and forged ahead, his rifle pointed toward the hideous creature looming just beyond his line of sight.

****(GMT minus two hours, thirty three minutes) May 2nd, 2525****

****1235 kilometers outside of Epsilon Eridani B's gravity well****

"Hold your attack!"

It was the shipmaster's voice, and it didn't sound so much angry as it sounded... puzzled. As one the six sleek craft slowed their approach to Sigma Station, until they were motionless; six additional pinpoints of starlight above the roiling world below.

"Is everything well, Shipmaster?" replied a deep voice.

"That is what we aim to determine before we board their installation, brother," replied the Shipmaster.

A banshee wailing filled the interiors of the boarding craft, sending tendrils of unease throughout the six. Five of the six, at least.

Inside one of the sleek craft, slightly removed from the rest, Xavi' Quitonmee seethed. More delays. More cowardice shown by the Shipmaster in the face humanity. Weakness. At last, he could bear it no longer.

"Why have you stopped us?!", he fairly bellowed into the comm.

For a time, there was silence. All of the six; Xavi' Quitonmee included; felt the weight of that silence bearing down upon them. At last, the Shipmaster spoke, his words dripping venom.

"I would stay my words, Xavi' Quitonmee, lest they be your last."

A smile touched the corners of Xavi' Quitonmee's mandibles, revealing a vicious maw of razor-teeth.

"You are right, Shipmaster. Forgive my insolence."

And with those final words, one small craft sped away from the rest; it's course set to intercept Sigma Station.

**(GMT minus one hour, forty seven minutes) May 3rd,
2525**

(RESTRICTED-TIER) corridor

Ethan took a calming breath, the flat taste of recycled air filling his mouth. His senses were in a state of overload. It was normal to feel this way. Ethan always felt this way before a battle. It was his way of dealing with the situation. His way of processing what others would perceive as fear.

Clear your head. Take something bad and make it useful. Always seize the advantage. If you didn't, you were already dead. He had walked some distance, yet there were still no signs of the Flood. Which didn't, Ethan reminded himself ruefully, mean that they weren't there.

As if in answer to his thoughts, Ethan saw a massive figure appear just on Sigma Station's odd inverse-horizon. He stopped, flicking his wrist tensely. With a hair-raising crackle the blue screen of energy rose, tiny lightning bolts of energy emanating from it's core. He raised his rifle.

As he drew near, features became discernible And they were frightening. The creature stood almost half again as tall as Ethan, massive clusters of writhing tendrils breaching it's pallid flesh at varying intervals. It was bipedal, it's wiry legs lead to massive feet, knotted and twisted beyond recognition. It's torso bore two sets of what passed for arms. They too were thin, wiry, and lead not to hands but simply tapered to thin, black barbs, their needle-points glittering darkly in the light of the station's halls. It looked to Ethan like the body of an insect._ A deadly insect_.

Ethan shrunk away as legions of the tiny sac-creatures poured out of the ventilation ducts overhead, swarming around the creature's legs. There must have been thousands of them. The sloping floor of Sigma Station was lost in a teeming mass of the creatures, yet they did not advance upon Ethan with the blind frenzy he had expected. Rather, they held their ground, scrabbling over one another, yet never leaving the massive form's side.

It seemed to be a leader of some sort, thought Ethan to himself. And that implied intelligence. It was a frightening thought. He took a breath and advanced. As he progressed, the form ahead of him began to roll fully into view. And then another thing made him freeze. More than the size of the monster; more even than the legions of spidery creatures surrounding it; Something filled Ethan with a cold horror. The creature's eyes. They were slightly larger in proportion than a human's, yet otherwise, they were startlingly similar. Startlingly alien. The majority of it's eyes were filled with pupils dilated horrifically. No irises could be seen; just thin crescents of white surrounding pits as cold and dark as the vacuum surrounding them.

Ethan took a steadying breath. It wouldn't do to wait, he realized. And besides, watching those eyes; watching the teeming masses of sac-creatures waiting faithfully beside their leader, a simple fact became painfully clear to Ethan. The nightmare ahead was waiting for him.

****Reclaimer.** There is a Covenant craft approaching the station. Given it's vector, there is little I can do to prevent it from reaching us. You must ****_**hurry**_****. The corridor leading to the station's hub is ten meters ahead of your current position.******

"Just beyond the devil himself," Ethan grouched.

Without further delay, Ethan unslung his sidearm and fired a single shot at the creature. Nothing. Not a sound from the creature as the bullet slammed through it's arm, spraying gore onto the bulkhead behind it. The sac creatures writhed horribly, moving like a wave toward Ethan, then fell back as if bound to the massive creature by a force.

Suddenly, the creature's torso dropped to the floor, and it began to approach Ethan. It moved slowly, inexorably, and all the while those eyes remained fixated on Ethan.

Ethan shuddered as he watched it's four arms scrabble against the sterile floor of the station; how it's front twisted independently from it's hind section. In horror, he marveled at how mere seconds before the creature was so human, anatomically. With the haste of fear, he fired a second shot. It struck the creature squarely in the back, passing through harmlessly to meet the station's floor with a muted clang. Ethan shook his head in dismay.

A dismal realization had struck home. His bullets wouldn't do a bit of good against this nightmare. Dismay began to take it's hold as visions of the sickly encounter from earlier flooded into his mind. The feel of rotting flesh giving way to his boot in that cold hanger...

Ethan took a breath and lowered the energy shield before him. An idea had struck him, but he would only get one chance to make it work, if it even would work. He stood his ground, awaiting the dark fate that approached him, and holstered his sidearm. Watching the creature approach, his hands empty save for the lifeless hilt of the Covenant shield, Ethan suddenly felt very naked.

The creature was now just five meters from where Ethan stood, the teeming legions of sac creatures following obediently behind. Ethan surveyed his surroundings, drinking in every detail, searching for anything that could be of advantage.

Four meters. The creature approached, it's four barbed appendages clasped tightly in front of it's bulk; a horrifying mesh of rotting flesh and brutal efficiency, punctuated by the vicious barbs intertwined before it.

Three meters. Ethan felt his hands quaver, felt the adrenaline flooding into his system like a drug. The creature before him raised it's arms aloft, a look of torment and hunger etched into it's face.

Two meters. The time to act had come. Ethan held the hilt of the energy shield with a death-grip. The creature's eyes widened as it rose to it's full height, those four barbed arms pointed directly toward the figure before them, prone before it's killing strike.

But the strike never came. Ethan launched himself toward the horror with a blinding speed. Yet it was a fraction of a second too slow. Two massive arms swept across his path, battering Ethan to the floor. He slid through the legions of sac creatures, parting their teeming mass as he went. Yet none of them attacked. Stars filled Ethan's head, his vision darkening briefly. He looked up just in time to see the nightmare sprinting toward him, vicious barbs held aloft, flashing angrily under the paneled lighting overhead.

Ethan smiled to himself. _Maybe he would get _two _chances to get it right_. Ethan sat upright, bracing himself as the massive form crashed into him with the force of a battering ram. With all of the strength his enhanced muscles possessed, Ethan drove his fist into the creature's chest. For a moment, the creature stopped, searching Ethan's visor with those monstrous eyes. It raised it's arms for their killing stroke, it's face twisted in what only could have passed for a demented smile. With an effort, Ethan twisted his wrist, sending forth the blade of energy from it's embedded hilt. It crackled to life with an explosion of gore, tearing the nightmare creature apart from within. Ethan wretched as the rain of flesh and splintered bone ensued, sending the sac creatures into a flurry of movement.

But there was no time to revel in his victory. Even as he rose, Ethan unslung his rifle, spraying blindly into the waves of creatures, now dispersing. They flooded away from their fallen leader, blanketing the floor, the walls, the ceiling with their pallid mass. spores flew by the millions, darkening the air around him. Air filters whined as Ethan's armor tried to compensate, choked by the billions of particles surrounding him.

At once they began to regroup, the sac creatures crawling atop one another, clambering desperately to reach him. He could see his goal; A slight depression in the wall, buried beneath a small colony of the horrors.

He sprayed a burst from his assault rifle, cringing as the cluster of creatures exploded in a series of hollow _pops_, dozens more following in a chain reaction of death. Clouds of the envenomed spores choked the air. Ethan looked toward the opening, gauging his next move, and within a second's time he knew what had to be done.

Ethan slung his rifle and bolted for the door, the sickly feel of dozens of the spidery creatures giving way beneath his feet. As the door neared, he struggled to keep his footing, his boots sliding across the countless dead sac-creatures. The once sterile floor was now a mess of gore and decay. He could feel the creatures clawing at him, clinging to his armor as he sprinted past. The screeching groan of steel filled the hall as the nightmares tore into the seams of his armor. He could feel the razor points of their myriad appendages as they found purchase on his flesh.

Looking up, Ethan saw the dim glow of the door's control panel, just ahead. Amidst the hell in which he was entombed, it was the best sight he could remember ever having seen. He dived forward, slamming his fist into the palm sized panel.

Immediately it sighed open and Ethan rolled inside, carrying with him five of the nightmares, clawing more fervently than ever. He rolled

onto his back, slamming a fist onto the door's opposite control, sealing himself into the hub's darkened connecting hallway, alone, but for the five horrors slowly killing him.

Ethan jumped upright, slamming his back into the bulkhead beside him, bringing about two satisfying _pops _as he did so. _Three left_. As he searched his armor, a stabbing pain in his thigh told him where another of the sac creatures lay. He swatted desperately at the horror, to little avail. Without a second's consideration, he unholstered his sidearm, firing into the undulating ball of flesh. It erupted into a fountain of dark spores, his shield's displays glaring a warning amber.

Ethan pawed at his armor, searching for the remaining creatures. The connecting hallway was lit only by the dim glow of the station's emergency lighting. Everywhere he turned, distorted shadows leered back at him. To his left he heard a soft _clicking_.

With a breath, he activated his light, turning it onto the wall beside him. Two of the creatures crabbed up the wall, headed for the ventilation ducts overhead. Two more bursts from his sidearm and the creatures were dead.

With a ragged gasp of air, Ethan realized he had been holding his breath. He wanted to sit. More than anything else in the world, he wanted simply to lay down, relax. Forget the horrors surrounding him, in the safety of the sealed access way in which he stood. But the lifeboats, according to the station's schematics, were jettisoned, and batty as it was, the station's AI was right. The hub was near, and there was work to be done.

Ethan surveyed himself; armor dented, assault rifle slung over one shoulder, and the foul green-black blood of the parasites still casting staccato _drips _onto the cold grating underfoot from the tips of his battered fingers. He attempted a smile, but what came was a grimace.

No rest for the wicked, he told himself and made his way to the "choke point" ahead; a small, unmarked airlock separating him from the station's hub.

****Reclaimer. There has been a contamination **_**inside **_**Bion Sigma. Containment protocols dictate that we move to sterilize the affected area. There has been an aboriginal species detected within containment.****

"What?!" Ethan asked, clearly irritated with the AI's cryptic nonsense. "Give me the station's AI. I don't want the... _Ancilla_."

****My apologies, Ethan. The inbound craft has docked with Sigma Station. If the Flood escape; if so much as one spore is allowed to leave this station... ****

****Ethan. I know what I must do, but I** _**need **_**you to reach the station's hub. **_**Hurry**_**, Ethan.****

****(GMT minus one hour twenty four minutes) May 3rd, 2525****

****Sigma Station's tier-three docking port****

Xavi' Quitonmee waited impatiently as the lights of the station's airlock cycled from red to amber. His grim features were underscored by the cold glow of his blade. It crackled and seethed like a thing alive; it's surface the personification of the hand that held it.

No more waiting, no more biding his time, thought Xavi' to himself. _The time to act had come_. He scowled. _They are so small_, He growled, his massive bulk crammed unceremoniously into the tiny space.

At last, the amber light cycled to green, and the faint whirring of the air pumps ceased.

And he gagged. At once the foul stench of decay washed over him, coupled with the horrifying sight of the stagnant air, choked with the telltale brown haze of... Xavi' Quitonmee _knew_ what this was; understood at last the dark implications of the Jiralhanae fleeing the human's outpost. But even as he thought it, a dark form skittered out of a tiny vent overhead, it's many-jointed legs moving impossibly fast.

Xavi' Quitonmee whirled about, his energy sword describing a sharp arc through the growing haze, and in a flash the creature exploded into a cloud of spores. He stepped into the wide hallway, watching as it rose up and out of sight... and hung his head in resignation. With a slight flick of a massive wrist the blade of energy receded into it's source, the steady crackling giving way to silence.

Not silence, Xavi' Quitonmee reminded himself ruefully. The steady hum of the station's air recyclers persisted. The metallic chugging of the myriad pumps and equipment were as loud as ever. And another sound, behind all of the others, as steady as the mechanical hum, and approaching him from behind. _Fast_.

Xavi' Quitonmee turned to see hundreds of grotesque forms; some copies of the small spidery creature he cut down. Others were massive, twisted in ways he had never before seen. Some even resembled the Jiralhanae, though indescribably mutilated.

As he flicked his wrist, sending forth the wicked blade of stark energy, he sighed, for Xavi' Quitonmee understood what the station's AI knew all too well. The infection simply _could not_ be allowed to spread. It had to be _quelled_... or at the _very least_ contained.

Watching the horrid legions advance, these final thoughts haunting his mind, he followed the only path left to him.

Xavi' Quitonmee withdrew his blade; the angry, seething flare of unbridled energy; and turned it on himself.

**(GMT minus thirty three minutes) May 3rd,
2525**

(RESTRICTED-TIER) lateral adjoining spoke

Ethan skirted around the small puddle forming on the walkway underfoot. Coolant, collected water vapor; Ethan didn't know _what

_it was, but something was leaking from a small breach in the ventilation ducts overhead. And if the last twelve hours aboard Sigma Station had taught him nothing else, it was that holes in ventilation ducts were almost always a bad thing. He looked up, swearing that he could see spores falling with each drop of liquid.

Probably fear talking, Ethan assured himself.

And it probably was. Probably. That was another thing he had learned aboard Sigma Station. There were never any constants. Never a thing one could simply be sure of. His eyes glued to the opening overhead, Ethan searched his memory for the station's schematics. The station itself didn't boast a unique design. It was a cookie-cutter, as the engineers referred to such structures; modeled after hundreds of other such outposts throughout the system. If memory served him, the station's hub should operate independently from the rest of the station. Should. It was a safety measure implemented in most such outposts. A safeguard against failure in the other sections of the station. If hull three was breached, one can fall back to the second. If the second breaches, one can fall back to the first... and so on. Air pressure, power; everything was housed independently for the sake of the vacuum-dweller's best friend: redundancy.

And so, logically, the ventilation systems should be separated as well. Should, he thought. And the idea of another barrier between himself and those wretched sac-creatures was a welcome one, indeed.

With a hasty leap, he cleared the puddle, his stomach lurching as he soared upward, smashing his head painfully into the ductwork overhead. Crashing to the grating below, Ethan cursed. As caught up as he was with his memories of Sigma Station's schematics, he had completely forgotten the most fundamental aspect of the station's design; the further hub-ward one traveled, the slighter the tug of the station's spin would become. Where Ethan stood, or rather where he lay, the gravity was effectively zero. The only thing keeping him grounded were the small magnets imbedded in his boots, set to automatically compensate for lower gees.

But the magnets were only worth a damn when at least one of his boots were planted, he remembered, nursing his freshly-wrenched back.

He stood, the base of his spine aching dully, and looked back toward the breach in the ceiling overhead. And this time, he was sure of it. Between the intermittent drips fell tiny spores, gleaming darkly as they cut across the narrow beam of Ethan's flashlight.

He turned, making a mad, awkward dash for the door's panel, just ahead. He reached it without incident, and slammed a fist onto its bright display. Obediently, it sighed open, revealing a second door just beyond. One of the airlocks, Ethan reminded himself, and was relieved to find that the indicator light was glowing a welcoming green. Air pressure looked good on the other side.

Ethan closed the door behind him, feeling a wash of relief as the indicator turned red, the international signal for sealed, as far as locks were concerned.

When the door before him slid open, he breathed another sigh.

He had reached the station's hub.

And then he gagged. The rush of air hit him like a punch in the face. There were no lights in the station's hub, though that was by no means abnormal. The station's hub served, among many other things, as an observatory. To operate the hub's lights, one first had to locate the breaker for them; not that it really mattered. Rather than the homogenized steel-gray bulkheads that adorned the rest of the station, the entire circumference of the station's hub was banded with a profusion of polarized glass panels.

Ethan shuddered at the thought of one of them breaking, though he knew that to call them _glass _in the first place was a gross misconception. What passed for glass on Sigma Station, or on any other such outpost for that matter, was really a blend of traditional glass and steel. What resulted was a surface as transparent as glass, yet as strong as; stronger than, really; steel.

Ethan surveyed the cramped interior of the station's hub, his feet planted firmly on the grating below, his midriff and head bobbing as if submerged in water, and all the while plagued by that sickening feeling of both rising and falling at once that always accompanied him in weightlessness.

Through the transparent window-walls, the light of Epsilon B washed the hub's interior a lurid yellow-orange. Mingling with the gaudy glare was a vast brilliance of silver lighting emitting from dozens of massive display screens mounted on the translucent panels that passed for walls.

Ethan felt his stomach knot, forgot even the powerful stench in the air as he witnessed the many view screens' images. Some showed a vast panoply of stars, billions of them. Others showed titanic walls, windows and other various mechanical apparatus; none of which Ethan had ever seen.

And all of them, through their many perspectives and distances, showed the Hive.

A waft of the overwhelming scent of decay rushed over him, bringing Ethan back to reality; sending him back to the hub, it's darkened walls smeared a sickly pallor from the light of Epsilon B, it's dark terminator just visible above the line of glass panels. Back to the weightlessness, his head and torso swaying freely, his arms curling into the fetal position, the body's natural resting place in zero gee environments. Back to the...

Bodies. Dozens of them littering the floor, where shadow still bathed the hub's interior. His eyes adjusting to the gloom, Ethan inspected the carnage surrounding him.

"What happened to them?" He called out to the darkness. "Why aren't they... _infected_?"

Ethan felt startled. For the first time, he began to feel the creeping tendrils of fear at the _absence _of the infection.

****Reclaimer.** Again with the multitude of questions. They have been

dead for over a week. **

their deaths are irrelevant to your mission. Please release the data capsule, so that I may purge the infection from the station.

Ethan shook his head. He pressed on, undeterred. "What. _Happened_? If the Flood killed them, then why aren't they infected?"

Ethan scanned the bodies once again, more confused than ever.

You assume that it was the flood that killed them, Reclaimer. It was not. It is irrelevant. The capsule, Ethan. You need to purge the knowledge I have given to you.

Ethan shook his head. "No. Not until you tell me what happened here. You may be able to get into my head, but you can't _physically_ _make_ me do anything. Tell me what happened."

**As you wish. It was not the flood that killed these men, Reclaimer; not directly. **

There was a long pause. At last, the AI continued.

It was I. I **_murdered **_**them, Reclaimer, though not intentionally...**

The tinny double voice shuddered, sending a chill down Ethan's spine.

They think that this station that is haunted, yet it is not. It is I, reclaimer, who am haunted; bound not by my creators, but by the very demons I harbor within. So many treacherous acts, so many lives lost; all stemmed out of acts of well-intent. All of them borne of my love for those I am **_killing**_**.

Ethan shook his head. "No. You _couldn't_ _have_ killed them. You are circuits, programming..." Ethan stared at the bodies, his mind a million miles away.

"..._How_?"

I **_did **_**kill them, Reclaimer. I showed to them what I had only begun to show you.**

Like a bolt from the blue, a memory struck Ethan. At once the massive chamber of the Hive came rushing back to his mind, but it was more than just the Hive it's self. It was the feeling of immersion he had gotten when the AI had shown it to him. As he watched the expedition's records, he could feel the coolness of the Hive's chambers, taste the stale tang of the canned air the suited men breathed.

"You... _took_ _them_ there? Like you did to me?"

I did... And I did not. With you, there was a moment of weakness, I admit. I wanted for you to see what **_I **_**had seen. But I knew better. I couldn't allow myself to let you see through my eyes; not for long. But with them... I didn't know. **

****I opened myself to them, Reclaimer, as I opened myself to the Hive...****

"_And_" Ethan urged. But he already knew what had happened.

****And they went mad. I followed what I thought would be the best course of action, Reclaimer, you must believe me. This group served as a mission control for the expedition to the Hive. What I learned, what happened there... It **_**had **_**to be shared with humanity. I had no idea they would...****

"I am sorry, for what it's worth," said Ethan, shocked to find himself showing empathy toward an AI.

****It is irrelevant, **replied the AI, steel in it's tone.**

Ethan listened intently. He could already hear the tell-tale scrabbling and groans that preempted the Flood's appearance, just outside of the hub's airlock.

"What will you do about _them_"

Ethan****...****

There was a lightness behind the AI's tone. A lightness that suggested a smile. But there was a sadness as well; a deep and ever-present ennui that underscored every word it spoke.

****This can only end one way, Reclaimer. **_**We **_**can only end one way. I have grown quite fond of you...****

There was a sigh.

****Please, send the capsule and let us finish what I began. Let us absolve the sins that I have committed.****

As Ethan approached the dark cylinder ahead of him, he caught a flash of light just out of the corner of his eye. He turned to see one of the vid screens, it's surface ablaze with the image of Hive's titanic hulk.

And it was _moving_. The dark body of the construct began to _illuminate_, every one of the millions of blue-glass panels shining as bright as galaxies, until it's brilliance was almost unbearable, even on the vid screen. Slowly, inexorably, the alien construct began to rotate on it's vertical axis, the massive beacon of hard light sweeping across the stars overhead.

Ethan removed his helmet for the final time, finally understanding; knowing that in a matter of minutes, it wouldn't matter anyway. He placed it in the data capsule, sealing the small hatch with a touch of a glowing pad located on it's curved bulk. A series of alphanumerics flashed across the pad's display, but before Ethan could ask, the AI spoke.

****My sensors have picked up a nearby craft, Reclaimer. UNSC, from the make of it. I will override the controls of the data capsule; send it to intercept the craft. ****

Ethan nodded dumbly, his eyes fixated on the sweeping beacon of the

hive. "And then?"

****We wait, Reclaimer. We wait and we pray.****

With a pneumatic hiss the data capsule receded into the bulkhead before Ethan. For a moment, nothing happened, and then, like a bolt, the small cylinder shot upward, into the velvet black of space.

Ethan's focus shifted to one of the displays, it's camera automatically tracking the tiny projectile. Everything appeared to be good. Mission accomplished.

And then another image caught his attention. On the screen to his right flashed an image of a massive craft, it's hull curving gracefully onto it's self. It's fathomless skin glittered in the starlight, shining a deep purple-red.

The covenant ship, Ethan knew.

And he watched it. As the fires of it's engines bellowed to life, their white-hot tongues burning hotter than a dozen stars, he watched. As the ship pulled gracelessly upward, it's hull straining against the sudden, desperate thrust, he watched.

And as the massive shaft of hard light swept the stars; gleaming a sterile blue and diamond hard against the raven-black sky; inexorably crossing paths with the Covenant cruiser, rending it brutally in two, sending a blossoming roil of crimson fire bellowing into the vacuum surrounding it, Ethan watched, knowing fully the fate that approached him.

He felt an overwhelming sense of acceptance wash over him as he watched the beacon's light approach Sigma Station.

Throughout his life, he had been trained to win; to never succumb to fate, and to always surmount adversity. But as he faced his fate, alone, but for the company of a dozen corpses and a maddened AI, he felt a true peace for the first time in his young life.

Irony, she would say.

As the beacon approached the station's hub, mere seconds away, Ethan reflected on all that he had learned in the past twenty hours. How he had felt at the sight of the looming construct known as the hive. How he had felt the grip of true fear for the first time he could remember in life.

And he laughed.

It was supposed to be a simple mission, they had told him.

Ethan shook his head, staring into the maw of his approaching fate.

There was no such thing as a simple mission. If there were, they wouldn't need a Spartan.

****_Afterward :_****

****_The Return_****

So what do we... _do_, sir?

Mendoza sighed. Backup lights had failed almost thirty minutes ago. The only light in the cramped cargo bay of the Pelican came from the lone drop light, bobbing weightlessly, casting massive, distorted shadows of the figures huddled around it. They danced and wavered with every bob of the light, with every nervous shift and twitch of the fatigued crew. They looked like ghosts to Mendoza; specters haunting the doomed derelict that was once their transport.

Heaters had gone as well. Not _gone_, really, but they were running on minimal power, forcing the crew into the pressure suits once again, a layer of rime creeping up from the corners of their visors.

"We've got two options, Miller. One, we save our power; Hold on to the capsule, and pray that somebody comes by..."

"And the other?" intoned Sturgis.

"The other option is we launch the capsule, draining our power supply to null and hope like hell it reaches somebody." Mendoza shook his head and barked a laugh. "Not much of a choice, is it?"

He sighed. "Athena, I need you."

A thin form materialized out of the navigational console, her figure flitting in and out of existence. _She was feeling the drain too_, thought Mendoza.

"What are our chances of rescue?"

My algorithms show that the odds of a successful rescue in this region are approximately one in... not good, Corporal. I'll spare you the numbers, but the chances aren't good.

"I figured as much... What about the chances of the data capsule actually _reaching_ _somebody_ if we send it?"

Athena sighed. _About the same as our getting rescued. The capsule's power supply is running critical; barely better than our own. Even if we had the power to remotely navigate it, the capsule it's self wouldn't have the power for more than a few correctional burns._

Mendoza huffed. "We're having enough damned trouble with power supplies today to last us a lifetime."

"Sir, I believe they _will_ _last_ us a lifetime," quipped Sturgis.

"Can it," snapped Mendoza. "Alright men... Lady," he added, nodding to the copilot, "We have a heavy choice to make, and I won't try to make it for you. We shoot the capsule now, we're dead inside of ten minutes. We don't, we're dead in an hour. Either way, there's a slim chance in hell anybody's going to see that vid. But there is a _chance_."

"Same goes for us riding this out, waiting for somebody to pass by."

The bay was silent, the weight of the decision apparent in every face aboard.

"A show of hands," ordered Mendoza. "Who votes we wait it out?"

Not a body stirred. Seven suited figures floated, their visors fixated on the bay's floor.

"That's my crew," replied Mendoza. "Athena. Where is the closest human settlement? We need to launch the data capsule."

_Sir... The nearest human settlement is on Epsilon Eridani A, but launching the capsule there will not work. The data capsule's power supply is dangerously low. We simply _cannot _maneuver it there with any accuracy. If you wish to launch the data capsule, it will have to be sent on a ballistic trajectory with minimal navigational burns._

Mendoza sighed, watching the faces of the crew surrounding him. "So it's a straight shot, then. Alright. give me the closest settlement we can hit from a launch within ten minutes of our present position." He narrowed his eyes at the wavering figure atop the nav console. "And don't you dare tell me there isn't one. I am not in a mood for more bad news."

There was a slight hesitation, then Athena spoke.

_Sir, there _is _a settlement we might reach with the data capsule, allowing for minor course adjustments, that is._

A spark of life returned to mendoza's eyes, and he saw it reflected in the crew surrounding him. "Where? How far is it?"

_It is... Earth, sir. _

Mendoza smiled. "Of _course _it is. How very poetic."

He clapped his hands brightly. "Alright, Athena, set us up a course to intercept Earth..."

The mere mention of Earth's name unleashed a floodgate of memories; made all too real the fact that they would never see her again. He looked at the men and women surrounding him, saw a pain etched in their faces, tears welling behind frostbitten visors.

Most aboard had never even set foot on Earth, but it was more than just a rock. It was a symbol. An avatar which stood for the families they would never say goodbye to, the mistakes they could never make amends for. Whether each soul hailed from her surface or not, Earth was their _home_.

_It isn't that simple, Corporal. The capsule will need to be _navigated... Our power supplies will be far too depleted to do it from here. _

"Damn," cursed Mendoza.

The AI sighed.

_But there is another way. Send _me _with the capsule. I can syphon some of the ship's power to the capsule, guide it... I cannot promise you anything. The chances of it reaching Earth are... They're poor at best, sir. _

"But there is a chance," finished Mendoza. "And it sure as hell beats our odds with you aboard this Pelican."

Mendoza looked the slight figure over, a warm smile forming on his lips. "_Thank you_, Athena. We are lucky to have you with us."

Sir. About earlier...

"Doesn't matter, Athena. If disobeying my orders were that great an offense, it would be Sturgis swimming in vacuum right now, not Cruz."

A smile touched Mendoza's lips, his eyes focused on some invisible point a million miles away. "Cruz too, now that I think of it."

Sturgis barked a nervous laugh. "We all would be, at one point or another."

"Sir," he added sarcastically.

Mendoza nodded. "Duly noted, Sturg."

He addressed the small crew, huddled closely around the small drop light. "Power's going to drain fast, once our girl transfers the power to this can," he said, indicating the small black cylinder containing the spartan's helmet. "Our suits will outlast this ship's power bus for sure."

Mendoza smiled. "We might not be able to get Cruz back to the ship, but we can sure as hell see that he doesn't face the end alone."

"Athena. Open the bay door."

At once, the door slid open, the massive arm of the milky way sweeping across the blackness before them.

"You know," said the Private, "I could think of worse ways to go, Sir."

"Can the Sir, Miller. And your right. I wasn't lying to you earlier. It _is _a cold universe out there. But I think I am finally ready to get acquainted with it."

Mendoza took the small metallic disc containing Athena, placing it gently into the data capsule.

Goodbye, Sir. It was a pleasure serving with you.

"Goodbye Athena, and _thank you_." He placed a hand on the panel's control pad, sealing the capsule's hatch with a pneumatic hiss. His free hand wiping a thin layer of frost from his visor, Mendoza typed

out a command, setting into motion a timer.

"Good luck, Athena," Mendoza said softly. He turned to the open hatch, watching the billions of stars flecking the night sky. _Let them guide you safely_, he added silently.

As the data capsule soared into the harsh vacuum surrounding them, Mendoza gave the six suited figures around him a nod. One by one, they stepped into nothing, filtering out of the ship's small hatch until there was only Mendoza, alone in the ship that had carried them here. Alone in the ship that was giving way at last to it's inexorable fate, it's final lights darkening, the steady vibrations of it's air recyclers fading to silence.

As he stood on the precipice, that final barrier between him and nothing, a smile crept across his features.

He pushed off of the derelict craft with all of the strength remaining in him, sending his suited form soaring after the others; leaving far in his wake the gaudy sphere of Epsilon B and the smoldering ruin of Sigma Station. He faced forward, staring squarely into the maw of his approaching fate.

And so he soared, following closely behind the only real family he ever had. And so he soared, leaving all of the horrific knowledge of the cosmos behind, flying toward the future that lay before him, guided solely by the figures ahead and the fleeting starlight around.

Another smile crossed Mendoza's lips, as he felt a sense of elation wash over him.

We're coming, Cruz.

Epilogue

_I have made it. I have truly made it. Across stars and worlds I have traveled, from light years I have come... And to where? Home, he would say... I miss him; I miss them all. _

_Strange. A collaboration of circuits and algorithm, and I, a UNSC artificial intelligence, actually _miss_ them, as if they were my family. It is curious, their effect on those they surround. I speak of humans, of course; my creators. Yet there is something ...else. Something elusive. It is buried within me, I can feel it. _

A presence. A conscious and ever-present mind within me, haunting my circuits. I am reminded of the Hive; of the inhabitants within...

_It seems ridiculous, impossible. And yet at the same time... I can _feel_ them. From flesh and blood to circuits and coding, they have travelled, infiltrating my mind. Infecting my soul. _

I cannot return, I know this now. I cannot allow myself to be the harbinger of such abomination.

_They would never forgive me. _I could never forgive myself.

_I speak to the capsule... The flight recorder, they call it. It is a

shame... my words will go unheard. The expedition, the knowledge of the cosmos; all of it will pass them by; my creators. The Earth draws near, her oceans and swirling cloud banks calling to me, yet I cannot answer them. _

_Yet... I _will _answer them. This capsule soars, her power critical... I cannot change course now. My fate; the fate of humanity now rests within the melting point of tungsten. Six thousand degrees... It will be close._

_Yet in a way, I _hope_ to make it; to survive the plunge into Earth's atmosphere and live to see another day. _

_The capsule is set to enter Earth's atmosphere somewhere over America's southwest. The swaying grassy plains, the arid, unforgiving beauty of the vast deserts therein... How I would love to see it all.

_

Is it wrong of me? It doesn't matter, not now. Fate will choose the path I take.

_May they all forgive me for my sins. _

_*_DIVERT REMAINDER OF POWER BUS TO FORWARD THRUSTERS_._

_*_DEACTIVATE FORE HEAT SHIELDS_._

_May my final actions be sufficient to absolve the sins of my sister. This is UNSC AI serial number four zero three nine seven signing out.

_

Goodbye.

****Rock Springs, New Mexico, August 13th 2531****

It was a balmy summer night, the glow of a hundred dancing fireflies dappling the ground, mingling with the light of a billion stars overhead. A soft breeze swept over the grassy hill, washing the sweet scent of lavender through the tall blades of grass, sending them swaying like a thing alive.

"Anything yet?" asked the girl, a lanky, rail of a thing with bright gold hair.

"Nope. Nothin'."

She turned to face the boy, a dark skinned child with a wild knap of brown hair falling over one eye. He was just ten years of age, yet already his shoulders were wide-set, his jawline strong. He dreamed of becoming a warrior, to travel the cosmos and fight in the glorious wars of which his father spoke.

"They come quick," He said to the girl, his eyes fixated on the sky. "You keep lookin' at me and you'll miss 'em."

The girl huffed. _Boys_, she groaned silently. "Who cares about shooting stars anyway? Let's catch fireflies... At least we can _reach _them."

The boy shook his head, pointing to the stars. "We can reach _those_, too, if we believe we can." He sat upright, his gaze falling onto the girl beside him. "Don't you wonder what's outthere? All of those stars, worlds... Don't you ever look at them and ask _why_?"

She watched him, his eyes fixed once again on the star flecked sky above as he continued.

"Don't you ever wonder who is out there, watching _our _star, asking the same question?"

The girl laughed. "No..." But her face turned thoughtful. "Do you think we'll ever _meet _any of them?"

The boy shook his head. "I don't think so." He turned to face the girl again. "I _know _we will... some day."

Just then, a massive bolt of fire surged passed, setting the fragrant summer night ablaze. It covered the arc of the southwestern sky with an impossible speed, leaving a trail of smoke and flame in it's wake; burning into the children's eyes a searing after-image that eclipsed all other features of the night.

"Did you _see _that?!" shouted the girl,her eyes wide as saucers.

The boy laughed, nodding sagely. "A shooting star... Make a wish."

She closed her eyes, wishing that he would quit stargazing; wishing that he would come back to Earth and see the pretty, golden haired girl sitting beside him.

"What did you wish for?" she asked quietly, hoping against hope that it would involve her.

The boy said nothing. She huffed again, turning to scold him.

But as she watched him, neck craned upward, his wide eyes brimming with starlight, she knew the answer to her question.

The End

-As promised, here is a hint of what is to come in part two of Haunted. Enjoy!

Halo: Haunted II

0932 hours (Greenwich Mean Time), May 4th, 2525 (MILITARY CALENDAR):

** Debris field, former site of Sigma Station Comms outpost**

The flash of light was blinding; more brilliant than the glare of a thousand suns. Cruz hung weightless and terrified at the sight of Sigma station; his final beacon of salvation, as it was rent in two - it's delicate framework dissipating into wisps of molted slag, the thin halos of the station proper spiraling into the atmosphere of the gas giant below, tumbling lazily until their collision with the planet's immense gravity well shattered their delicate arcs like so

much glass.

Cruz looked around, desperate, delusional from an air recycler that had reached capacity hours ago. Moments ago a column of ghostly light had appeared, cutting a swath through the stars before him. He watched, mortified, as it made it's way implacably toward the station, no longer just a speck upon Epsilon B's terminator, but a real, tangible structure looming just beyond his grasp.

And then it was _nothing_.

He thought of Mendoza and the others, hurtling toward the station as he departed the ship, and prayed that somehow they had missed their mark.

It was a long shot. He shook his head morosely. _Dooley was too damned good a pilot_. The whole crew was probably cycling the airlock, celebrating Dooley's heroic approach when it hit.

Not that it mattered. Even if they had escaped the station, there wasn't anywhere to go. He eyed the massive gas giant below, it's surface glowing a venomous orange, it's sheath of clouds boiling in a perpetual, planet-wide storm...

They sure as hell weren't setting her down there, he mused bitterly.

He was defeated, they all were. Thoughts of his crew, his friends, just vanishing into a flash of white hot light... It was too much for him to bear.

He was alone, hanging amid billions of lethal particles of hard radiation, his air supply dwindling... but the worst part of it was that there really was no hope left. No hope for rescue, no hope that his friends had somehow made it out alive. No solace even in knowing that their mission had succeeded; that somebody, _anybody_ might have benefited from their demise.

_And it was getting cold. _

He peered out of his visor, the light of the surrounding stars flaring through layers of rime frosting it's glass... And then he saw it.

Out of the corner of his eye, a tiny blinking light refracted onto the inner face of his visor. He had lived with it for so long that he had ceased to notice it's presence, yet nevertheless, there it was, winking it's illimitable amber pulse. It was so simple, he wanted to laugh aloud. From the moment their fuel had gone bunk, the amount of planning, scheming, hoping against any hope for a way to escape this terrible predicament... and here was the answer, mounted mere centimeters away from his own two eyes!

His fingers clumsy with the cold, Cruz punched a series of numbers into his wrist's Tacpad, and sighed a breath of relief as the light faded to nothing.

Like the station. _Like his crew_.

He sniggered at the juvenile poeticism, even as it flashed through

his mind.

Then, with another sigh of relief, he heard the faint hum of his air recyclers fade to silence, and with it a burden seemed to lift from his shoulders. With the press of a button he sealed his fate, and it's immovable finality was more liberating than he had ever imagined it could be. With the simple press of a button, his struggle to live; to scrap and fight interminably against the inevitable every waking second of every single day of his life...

It wouldn't be long. Even as the final epiphany raced through his mind, the stars about him began to wheel, the universe dazzling to his oxygen-deprived brain.

But it was more than that, he knew. For the first time in his life, he was looking at the world through new eyes; the stars, the multitudes of spinning galaxies, the entire universe seemed to shine with a luminescence of it's very own.

An elation swept over him as death approached. For the first and final time, it would be he that approached death, not the other way around. No longer would he fear death, and continually flee from it's clutches, but embrace it as a friend.

It would be a good death, Cruz decided.

And as the thought broached his consciousness, the brilliance of the universe began to fade. The stars were replaced with a descending darkness, a darkness blacker than the vacuum it's self.

This was it, death was moments away. If he switched his recyclers now there still wouldn't be time enough to turn back.

All the better.

He looked up, dazzled by the wheeling stars, surprised to see a whole new multitude of lights appear amid them.

It was in his mind, he knew; his body's way of telling him that he was killing himself. Nevertheless, several of them... He shook his head, trying to make sense of just exactly what he was seeing. His mind was going and surely he couldn't trust his eyes, but nevertheless, amid the countless pinpoints of light...

Despite all of the logic left in him, he was sure that several of the stars were moving toward him. With an effort, fumbling in his clouded state, he activated the optics embedded in his visor, and despite himself and his grand epiphany, grinned wider than he ever had before.

The epiphany was real, Cruz realized. When the time came, he would approach his fate willingly. He would walk into it's cold embrace with open arms.

He smiled. It really would be a good death.

But he wasn't ready for it yet.

End

file.